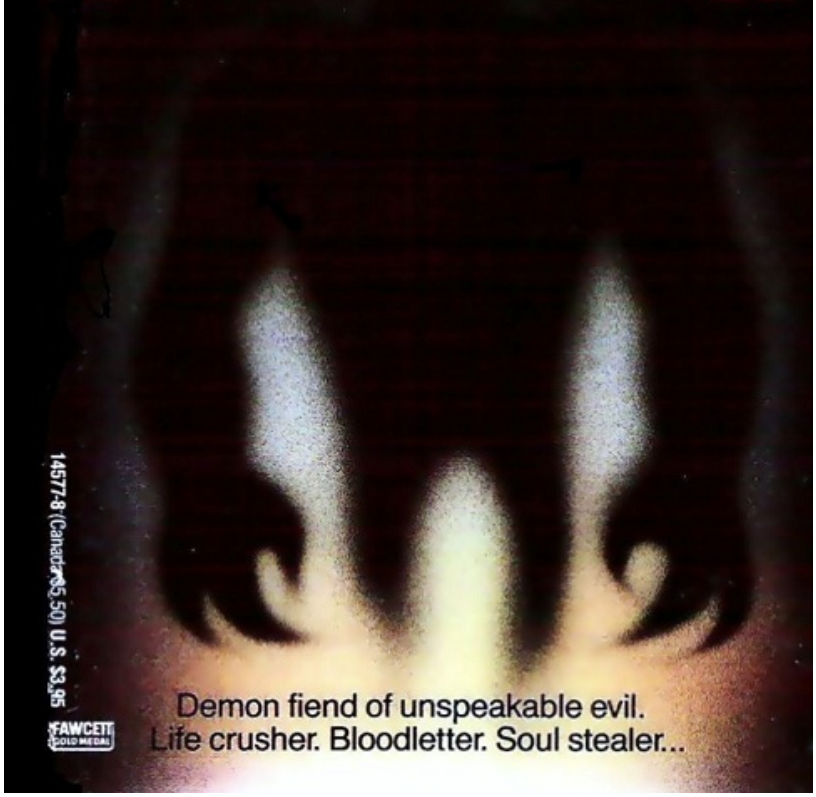
GARY BRANDNER

Author of THE HOWLING

DOOMSTALKER



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DOOMSTALKER

Gary Brandner

Prologue

The year was 1951.

Things were not looking good for this country in Korea, where the communists had retaken Seoul and General MacArthur was fired.

The Yankees looked like they were going to win the pennant again.

The most popular shows on television were the *Milton Berle*, *Fireside Theater*, and *Philco Playhouse*.

Playing at the Grand Theater in Prescott, Indiana, was *Father of the Bride*.

On the third Saturday in June the citizens of Prescott were little concerned with the police action in Korea. Except, of course, for the families that had sons in the armed forces.

The predictable success of the Yankees was no cause for celebration in Prescott. The only major league team recognized here was the Chicago Cubs. The other league was unanimously despised. But this being Indiana, all of baseball had to take a back seat to the One True Game - basketball.

As for television, there were only a handful of sets operating in the whole town, so the small screen had made little impact on Prescott.

It *was* a moviegoing town, but on the third Saturday of June the Grand was three-quarters empty for the matinee. It was the day of Reverend Kettering's church picnic.

Church picnics were still important in Prescott in 1951, but those presided over by the Reverend Harlan Kettering were widely recognized as the best. There was more and better food, prettier girls, more enthusiastic games, and somehow they always seemed

to have the finest weather.

One of the very few who were not thoroughly enjoying the picnic on that June Saturday in 1951 was the reverend's son Brian. At the age of six he was just beginning to find out what it meant to be the preacher's kid.

It meant, for one thing, that he was supposed to stay cleaner and generally be better behaved than other boys his age. It meant he was not supposed to say some of the neat words Billy Riddell brought to the first-grade class at Prescott Elementary. It meant he was expected always to leave the biggest piece of cake for somebody else, and he was supposed to smile and walk away when some kid called him a name. It was true that Brian did not live up to all these expectations, but he knew he was supposed to.

These attitudes toward him, Brian knew, had something to do with his father's job. It might have been different if Harlan Kettering worked in a store or in the Delco plant like the fathers of many of Brian's classmates. Or if he rode on a tractor and tended a dairy herd like the farmers just outside of town. But he didn't. He worked in a church. He spent weekdays in his study writing, or going somewhere to officiate at a wedding or christening or funeral. And he worked on Sundays. Brian resented it, but he never, never said so. Brian loved his father.

As for his father's history, Brian knew he had graduated from Ohio Wesleyan, traveled to North Africa in the late 1930s with some scientific expedition, and served there as an Army chaplain during World War II. He was sent home with a wound in 1943, when he married Brian's mother.

The Church assigned him to the Prescott parish in 1945, the year Brian was born. Like most children, Brian considered anything that happened before his birth to be irrelevant. He later had cause to regret that he paid so little attention to his father's stories of a rather adventurous early life.

Even though he loved the man, there were times when young Brian Kettering wished his father did almost anything else for a living. Times like this day at the church picnic, when all the other kids

were playing softball or shooting baskets or just running around making noise and he had to help set out the food. And now, with the potato salad spooned out, the hot dogs and hamburger patties ready for the grill, the bottles of Hires root beer buried to their necks in tubs of crushed ice, just when he had finished his chores and was about to dash off and join the ball game, his mother had something else for him to do.

"Brian, will you run home and tell your father to bring back the big jar of mustard out of the cooler along with the iced-tea crock? I declare, he's been so absentminded lately - "

"Why can't Jessie go?" Brian was not interested in hearing about his father's recent forgetfulness.

"Because I asked *you*."

Adult logic you could not argue with. Pausing to make a mad face at his sister, who pretended not to see, Brian took off running. The Kettering house on Bailey Street was five blocks from Hoosier Park and the picnic. Brian was a fast runner, and he gave it all he had.

The hot summer wind felt good on his face, and the comfortable old sneakers slapped the hot sidewalk with a satisfying *phwap, phwap, phwap*. A new pair of Keds was always a treat, and it felt good to run your fingers over the new, unworn tread, but a well-worn pair that had molded themselves to a guy's feet were like old friends.

As he crossed the street before his own block, Brian slowed. Something was different. Something was not as it was supposed to be. For one thing, the hot wind in his face had chilled, as though somebody had opened a refrigerator in front of him. The sky was still bright blue, the sun high, but there was no warmth in the air.

And it was quiet. More than quiet, it was silent. Brian stopped for a moment and listened. There should have been the normal springtime sounds - birds chirping, insects buzzing, a dog barking, the breeze rustling the branches of the silver maples that lined the street. There was nothing. Deadness. It was so quiet he could smell it.

Something else. Across the street from his house was parked the red, green, and white truck from Mr. Riggio's House of Pizza. Normally, the pizza wagon was a happy sight, bringing a cheesy treat for a cold night. For some reason the sight of it parked in his block today made Brian shudder. Who ever ordered pizza in the middle of the day? And especially on the day of the picnic, when there was all that great food and stuff to drink over at the park for anybody who wanted it?

The whole thing gave him a creepy feeling, like when Uncle Art told scary stories. Uncle Art was the reverend's brother and he worked in Chicago in some job that took him way up on the skyscrapers they were building there. He came to visit a couple of times a year, always with presents for Jessie and Brian. But what Brian loved most about Uncle Art's visits were the scary stories he told. Brian's father tried to discourage the stories, but Brian couldn't get enough of them, even though they made him feel creepy and sometimes kept him awake at night. The best was a story the last time Uncle Art came. It was about an unstoppable creature of supreme evil which unleashed a horrible vengeance on its victims. Brian had never heard the end of that one because Uncle Art had to go back to Chicago. Before he could come and visit again, there was an accident on a skyscraper, and Uncle Art came no more.

His uncle had not given a name to the undying monster, but Brian had come up with one in his mind. A name he never spoke aloud, but which could send him shivering under the covers at the mere thought.

Doomstalker.

Brian continued toward his house in the middle of the block, walking now. He kept looking at the pizza wagon. Mr. Riggio's House of Pizza was a wondrous place with flashing, clanging pin-ball machines, a jukebox with only the best and loudest music, and magical posters you could almost walk into. The kids loved it, but the marvels of the place seemed lost on grown-ups.

Mr. Riggio was a big man with a big stomach, heavy black eyebrows, and shiny eyes. He always greeted the kids with a smile and knew the kind of jokes a kid laughed at. He had a big, rumbling

laugh himself and was always ready to ruffle a guy's hair or pretend to square off for a punch.

All the kids liked him. After school a lot of them would hang out at the House of Pizza, often getting a free sample slice from the jovial pizza man. Older kids mostly, but a few Brian's age too. The fact that their parents didn't like it made hanging out there that much more fun.

All of which added to the confusion in young Brian's mind at the strange, unpleasant way the sight of the pizza wagon made him feel. He turned away from it and walked more quickly toward his house.

The strange cold grew more intense as Brian turned in at the walk leading to their two-story brick house. The silence was so heavy he could not even hear the thud of his sneakers as he climbed the five steps to the wide front porch. The drapes were pulled across the front window. Why? The drapes were never closed in the daytime. Anxious now to find his father, talk to him, be reassured, Brian hurried to the front door, reached for the latch ... and froze.

Coming suddenly as it did from the dead silence, the voice from inside the house hit him like a clap of thunder. It was a voice strained with anger. An anger shot through with a threat of violence that was jarringly out of place on quiet, shady Bailey Street in Prescott, Indiana. The voice, though distorted in its booming rage, was unmistakably that of his father.

Not that the Reverend Kettering had never before raised his voice. A minister of the Gospel was, after all, still a man capable of anger. But nothing like this. The dark fury of the man inside was beyond anything Brian had ever heard. He could make out only a few of the words in the thundering tirade. And some that he recognized had never before, to Brian's knowledge, passed his father's lips.

The boy stood with his hand still on the latch. His eyes bugged, his mouth hung open. The unnatural cold bit right through his Cubs T-shirt. His father's words, thunderous but not quiet understandable, echoed in his ears as though he were standing at the end of a tunnel.

Then there was another voice. Louder, deeper, and a hundred times more terrible than his father's. Again, Brian could not make out the words, but the tone was clearly dark and threatening. The menace in the voice was so strong that tears started to flow from Brian's eyes. And he was not a crier.

Moving stiffly, as though the unnaturally cold air around him had turned to gelatin, Brian moved to the front window. He got down on his knees and looked in through the space where the drapes had not quite closed.

Shadows on the wall. Movement, sudden and violent. His father and ... and ... and somebody ... something ... unspeakably ugly. A scream. A howl of mingled rage and pain. Blood. A blinding flash of white light.

Darkness.

Young Brian Kettering toppled backward and banged his head on the wooden boards of the porch.

Chapter 1

Detective Sgt. Brian Kettering pulled the two-year-old Camaro into his driveway and jammed to a stop behind his wife's neat little Honda. He got out, slammed the car door, and trudged across the thick lawn, past the carefully tended flower beds, to the front door of his brown and cream California ranch house. He shoved in through the door, peeling off his gray herringbone jacket as he crossed the living room.

In the kitchen Mavis Kettering tensed when she heard the car door slam out in front. She needed no other indication of the mood her husband was in. They had to talk, and soon, but this would not, she decided, be a good time.

Mavis dried her hands, smoothed the front of her skirt, and walked out into the dining room to be ready to meet Brian. She was a handsome woman with dark blond hair, clear Scandinavian complexion, and dazzling blue eyes. The skin tightened around her eyes when Kettering came in, and his expression confirmed her fears about his mood.

"You're home early," she said.

"Yeah."

"Trouble?"

"Trouble is my business."

He walked past her into the kitchen. Mavis followed. Idly he took a glass from the sink and held it up to the late afternoon light slanting in from the kitchen window.

"Something wrong?" she said.

"Why would there be anything wrong?"

Kettering replaced the glass and crossed to the high cupboard where they kept the liquor. He took down the bottle of Wild Turkey and studied it as though reading the label for the first time. Satisfied, he poured himself a liberal two ounces and added ice cubes. He stirred the drink with a forefinger, then took a deep swallow.

"Aren't you hitting the liquor a little early?" Mavis said.

"Any reason why I shouldn't?"

Mavis chewed her lower lip. "Do you want some soda to go with that?"

"What for?"

Kettering carried the drink back through the living room into the den, where they kept the big television set, the stereo, and a rack full of magazines. He shifted the belt holster that carried the S&W Centennial .38 to a more comfortable position and eased himself into the worn old recliner. He levered the chair all the way back, sipped deeply from the iced bourbon, and closed his eyes.

The back of Kettering's head pounded. There was a painful ringing in his ears. When he was a younger man, these headaches used to come with some regularity. His response in those days was hard physical action - running on the school track, working with his weights, a hard-fought pickup game of hoops in the gym. By concentrating on his body he was able to push the dark, not-quite-visible images out of his mind.

As he matured, the headaches hit less frequently. He had begun to think he might be rid of them forever. But about a month ago they started again. Just a feeling of pressure at first, then the pain. A little more and a little more, until today it was like a poker shoved into the base of his skull. And along with the headache, a chill, even though the temperature in the Valley was in the eighties. It could have been the beginning of the flu. Kettering would have loved for it to be the flu. But he knew better. He knew his symptoms were connected to the dream. The dream of Prescott, Indiana, and his

home there and dead Uncle Bob.

And Doomstalker.

The front door banged open. Kettering jerked the recliner upright so he could watch through the archway as his son slouched across the room toward the kitchen. Why the hell couldn't teenagers walk upright?

At seventeen, Trevor Kettering was an even six feet, nearly as tall as his father, but at 155 pounds, he had some filling out to do. Today he was wearing a T-shirt advertising Coors, and a pair of faded jeans with strategically placed rips in the fabric. Trevor's hair was a lighter shade of brown than his father's, but his eyes were the same coffee color.

Kettering called out to him in his best police-officer voice. "Hold it."

The boy stopped in mid-stride, turned to face him. "Oh, hi, Dad. You're home early."

"So people keep telling me. Come over here."

Reluctantly, the boy approached the recliner.

"What happened to your head?"

"My head?"

"The knob between your shoulders there. What's that growing out of it?"

Trevor put a hand to his hair. It was moderately short, moussed upright. "I, uh, got a haircut."

"That's a haircut? Why didn't they finish it?"

"Huh?"

"They left a lot of little points sticking up. You look like an unborn porcupine."

Kettering did not like himself when he turned sarcastic with his son. Once he started, he did not seem able to stop.

"Come on, Dad, this is no big deal. It's what the guys are wearing."

"What guys? The heroes in West Hollywood?"

Trevor's face began to darken. Kettering knew the boy's temper was rising and he should knock it off, but perversely he kept the pressure on.

"You talk like this was a Mohawk or something extreme. It's not. Don Johnson had this do on *Miami Vice*. Bruce Willis too. Or he would if he had enough hair."

"You think that haircut will make you a television star?"

"Lighten up, Dad."

"It looks like hell."

"It's what the guys are wearing."

"You said that. At least you can comb it down a little flatter."

"Yeah, okay."

Trevor took a step toward the kitchen. Kettering knew he had pushed too far again. Why the hell couldn't he and the kid communicate? It was the damn headache. It was always something.

He released his son with the wave of a hand, and Trevor escaped through the swinging door into the kitchen. Kettering took a long pull at the Wild Turkey and cranked the chair back to recline. He balanced the glass on his chest and closed his eyes.

Kettering floated through semidarkness. Gradually his tensed muscles relaxed. His nerves uncoiled. Weightless, he let himself drift wherever the currents of his subconscious took him.

***

Dimly on the far horizon a shadow shape appeared. At first no more than an indistinct lump, but filled with menace. It grew larger. Steadily, relentlessly, the shape came toward him. Kettering strained to pull away, to retreat from the oncoming figure. His movements were agonizingly difficult and slow, like backing away through hip-deep clinging mud.

The thing gained on him steadily. The advancing shadow coalesced into a vaguely human shape, yet was like no man who had ever walked the earth. The shoulders were high, hunched up to where the ears should be. The arms dangled apelike, ending in wicked curved talons. The long powerful legs overtook him with relentless strides.

The thing caught up with him. Huge and frightening, it loomed over him. Kettering swung on it with a right arm that had lost its strength. His fist was a tiny, useless toy. His entire body shrank to child size.

The monster hovered in front of him, its outline and details shifting and swirling like a creature of smoke, yet it was solid as death. All power of movement drained away from Kettering. The shadow figure reached down for him, claws grasping and wriggling. Where the face should have been was a dark, seething emptiness.

Doomstalker.

Kettering forced his mouth open and from the depths of his chest brought up a bellow of mingled rage and fear. The iced bourbon splashed across his chest, soaking through his shirt, chilling his flesh.

He awoke with nerves taut and vibrating.

Mavis, her hands still wet from the kitchen sink, appeared beside his chair. "What is it? What's the matter?"

Kettering righted himself awkwardly. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Jesus, Brian."

"I spilled my drink."

"The way you yelled, I thought you were having a seizure of some kind."

"I was dozing off. The cold startled me, that's all."

"Did you have a bad dream?"

"I told you, I spilled my drink."

She gave him a long look. "Brian, are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Just drop it, okay?"

Mavis flinched away from the cutting edge of his tone. "Sure. Right. Whatever you say." She turned back toward the kitchen and spoke without looking at him. "As long as we're all home, we might as well have an early dinner tonight."

"I'm not very hungry."

"You'll feel better if you eat something."

He sighed heavily. "I'll go change my shirt."

Mavis looked at him for a moment, then went back out to the kitchen.

Kettering got up and used a handkerchief to mop at his shirt. He retrieved the melting ice cubes from the chair and dropped them back into the glass. He hesitated, looking toward the kitchen, wondering if he should go out and say something to Mavis. Again he had spoken more sharply than he meant to. No, better leave it alone. He went on back to their bedroom.

***

Dinner at the Kettering house that evening was a grim and silent affair. Mavis's meat loaf, with its finely chopped green pepper and onion, and subtle combination of spices, usually drew raves from Trevor and even a compliment from Brian. Tonight it was eaten in silence.

Trevor ate quickly, glancing repeatedly at his watch, but he stayed in his chair. Kettering chewed and swallowed methodically, his thoughts somewhere else. Except for an occasional frown at his son's haircut, he might have been eating alone. Mavis watched them nervously, relieved when Kettering pushed his chair back, signaling that the meal was over.

When the dishes had been cleared away and Trevor had again escaped from the house, Kettering settled once more into his recliner, snapped on the television set, and flapped open the Valley *News*. He sat holding the paper in front of him without really reading it. Mavis came in and stood watching him.

"Are you going to tell me about it, or am I supposed to guess what's going on with you?" she said. "And if you tell me once more nothing's wrong, I'll scream."

"Don't start on me, Mavis."

"And don't you treat me like an intruder. We've been married eighteen years. I've got as much invested here as you. Maybe more. I saw it right away when you got up this morning. I hoped it was just a mood - you'd slept badly or something. But no, you come glooming back into the house tonight bringing your cloud of trouble with you. Something's wrong, Brian. I want to know what it is. You've gone through these moods before and I've let it pass. I can't do that anymore. If this is something we can fix, let's talk about it. And if it isn't, we'd better start thinking about alternatives."

"What's that speech supposed to mean?"

"It means communication around here is lousy, and I'm not going to take it anymore."

"You've been listening to that lady shrink on the radio again."

"Damn it, Brian, don't patronize me."

"All right, what can I say? I got up with a headache, I came home in a bad mood. It happens to everybody. I'm sorry. Okay?"

"No, not okay. If that was really the only problem, I could handle it.

But it's more. I'm not blind, Brian. Something is eating you up. And it's splitting us apart. Do you know how long it's been since we made love?"

"Twenty-seven days."

Mavis faltered for a moment, then went on. "So you've been counting too. It's a bad situation, Brian. We'd better do something about it while we still can. I'm not kidding."

"So call Dr. Ruth."

"Oh, that's fine. Be sarcastic. Belittle the problem. Anything to avoid the issue."

"Mavis, I promise you we'll sit down and talk this out for as long as you want and as seriously as you want. But not right now, okay? Right now I'm tired, my head hurts, I'm no good for talking or anything else."

Mavis hesitated before speaking again. "We're getting to be like strangers sharing the house. We don't talk, we don't do anything together. We haven't for a long time."

"I told you - " he began.

She took a deep breath and plunged in. "How about coming to church with me Sunday?"

"Not that again."

"Yes, that. Again."

"You know how I feel about church. How I've always felt."

"Because of your father."

"That's right. My father, the minister. He not only preached the Gospel on Sunday, he believed in what he preached. He never questioned the rightness of God and the Church. If the Church couldn't protect my father, it sure as hell isn't going to help me."

"Your father died before you were ready, that's all," Mavis said. "You can't hold the Church responsible for that."

"That's not the whole story."

"Are you ever going to tell me the rest of it? What really happened to your father?"

"I would if I could. I was six years old when I saw him die. It wasn't an easy death, Mavis. Not for him, not for me. To this day I couldn't tell you what I saw back then, but it haunts me. It's like something just outside my field of vision, and if I turned real fast, I could see it. Hell, I even spin around sometimes when I feel like that to try and catch whatever's hiding there. There never is anything. What can I tell you?"

Mavis held his eye until he looked away. Then she turned and left him alone.

Kettering scowled at the door where she had gone out. Nice going, Mavis, he thought. Tomorrow you can call it an even four weeks without sex, because with that attitude there sure won't be any fooling around tonight.

He made a disgusted sound in his throat. Who the hell was he kidding? Sure, go ahead and blame the woman. The easy way out. Engineer a fight. The male equivalent of the woman's headache. The truth was, he simply hadn't felt like making love for a long time. Not to his wife, not to anybody. Not since the headaches started again. And the dreams. Unlike a woman, a man had to be in the mood to do it, or it was impossible. He had taken to staying up later and later at night so Mavis would be asleep when he came to bed. And on his days off, times when they used to enjoy a leisurely morning in bed, he was finding excuses to get up early.

What the hell, maybe he had simply lost it. Age forty-three really shouldn't put him over the hill, but other men had pooped out earlier than that. Not fun to think about, but there was no denying the fact that he couldn't seem to get it up and keep it up anymore. At least not when he was in a position to do something about it with his wife. Sure, there was the traditional waking-up hard-on,

but that wilted as soon as he reached over and touched the familiar mounds and dips of Mavis's body. Familiar. Maybe that was the problem. There was not a square centimeter of her body that he did not know the feel of. Still firm and smooth, but too familiar. He knew her special smell, the taste of her. Maybe eighteen years was longer than a man and woman were meant to live together and still get each other excited.

Or, damn it, just maybe it was flat out his fault. Cops as a group were not the best husbands, and he had been maybe more distant than most. And since the dreams started coming again, his nerves had been constantly frayed. If he could just get a couple of good nights' sleep without the dreams, maybe everything would be okay.

And maybe not.

Chapter 2

By eleven o'clock in the morning Kettering had swallowed eight aspirin tablets, but the headache still lurked somewhere behind his eyes, waiting for a chance to grab his brain. When he finally went to bed the night before, he had slept only fitfully. He had waited for the dream to come. Blessedly, it had not.

Mavis had feigned sleep when he came to bed. That was fine with him. It would not be the first night they had spent lying next to each other in the queen-size bed without touching.

He could tell from Mavis's breathing that she too had slept poorly. At some time before dawn he came fully awake, feeling desperately lonely. Mavis, sleeping on her side with her face turned away from him, stirred in her sleep. Kettering waited, tense, for her to reach over and touch him. He was ready to wipe away their argument and respond by taking her into her arms. He really did love this woman. By the strength of his embrace he would reassure her of that. But Mavis kept to her own side of the bed, making no move toward him. Kettering was damned if he would be the one to reach out first.

In the morning he got up at the usual time and dragged himself into the shower. While he sluiced and soaped, Mavis got up and slipped on the grungy old terry-cloth robe he kept intending to replace. She went into the kitchen and prepared his usual weekday breakfast of grapefruit juice, one soft-boiled egg, an English muffin, and coffee. When he came in to eat it, she went off to her own bathroom. She was still in there when it was time for him to leave. He called a good-bye through the bathroom door. Her reply was muffled. Kettering shrugged, adjusted his hip holster, pulled on a jacket, and left the house.

It was a hell of a way to live, he thought. Man and woman

muttering at each other through closed doors. He stomped across the lawn, climbed into the Camaro - streaked now where the dew had made rivulets through the dust - and drove the four miles from his home to the West Valley Police Building.

His partner, Alberto Diaz, was already at his desk with the *Los Angeles Times* sports page spread out before him. Diaz had a square brown face that was made for laughing. At the moment he was frowning down at the newspaper. Kettering dropped into the chair at the facing desk with a groan.

"Can you believe who the Dodgers are talking about trading?" Diaz said without looking up. He waited. "Well? Can you?"

"Who?" Kettering said without interest.

"Only Pedro Guerrero."

"So?"

Diaz looked up at him in astonishment. "So? *So?* So without Guerrero they're a fourth-place team. Tops. What they need is - "

"Al, do you mind, today I can't be really worried about what the Dodgers need or where they finish."

"Whoa, aren't we touchy."

"Can we just bag the small talk?"

"Whatever you say." Diaz folded the sports page and stuffed it into a desk drawer. "Shall we get on the road?"

"Let's."

They checked out an anonymous WVPD Plymouth and spent most of the morning driving around in silence. Now and then Diaz would slide a sideways glance at Kettering, who always managed to be looking somewhere else.

About eleven o'clock Diaz said, "What do you want to do for lunch? Feel like Mexican?"

"I don't care. Whatever you want."

"Mexican's good. Sticks with you. Or maybe lasagna at the Brick Oven. What do you think, is lasagna too heavy for this time of day?"

"I told you I don't care."

Diaz drove on for several blocks in silence.

"They've got good salads too. The Brick Oven. Big. Lots of cheese and mushrooms."

Kettering grunted a reply without looking at him.

"You're not a lot of fun today, you know that?" Diaz said.

"Nobody told me I was supposed to entertain you."

"Hey, partner, you okay?"

"I'm fine. First-rate."

"Really?"

"I'm okay, for Chrissake. Can't I just be quiet once without you interrogating me?"

"Sure. Be quiet all you want. I like quiet."

Five more minutes.

"Al."

"Yeah?"

"Don't mind me. I didn't sleep much."

"It shows."

"Yeah. Be glad you're not married to me."

"Hardly a day goes by that I don't thank my stars."

After another five minutes Diaz said, "I think just a burger. I'm not all that hungry."

"Fine," Kettering said. "Burgers are fine."

The radio crackled with their call number. Kettering and Diaz listened as the female dispatcher gave them the message in her professional monotone.

"Can you believe it?" Kettering said. "Another Screwdriver sighting."

"He's a popular sumbitch," Diaz said.

"To be all the places he's been seen, the guy would have to be fucking quintuplets."

"This one isn't far from here," Diaz said. "We can check it out then go over to Wendy's on Reseda. Or do you think the Burger King?"

"Jesus Christ, Al - "

"Okay, okay, Wendy's then."

The Screwdriver was the police nickname for a rapist operating in Los Angeles and West Valley. The name derived from the sharpened tool he used to force his victims into compliance. Since the first of the year he had run up a total of some twenty victims in the two cities - young women living alone, generally in poor neighborhoods. So far nobody had been killed. The police figured it was only a matter of time.

Two weeks earlier a composite drawing of the rapist - early twenties, Latino, stocky build, long greasy hair - had been published locally and shown on the nightly newscasts. Since then L.A. and West Valley Police departments had received more than a hundred reports from people who were sure they had seen him. Each report had to be checked out. So far none had proved accurate. This one was sighting number eight for the team of Kettering and Diaz.

A woman had called in to say, in some agitation, that a man who looked like the Screwdriver was living in the same building as her mother. An address in the 14700 block of Saticoy. He was in

apartment 212 with a young woman, and the caller reported strange sounds coming from inside.

"Guy's probably having a beef with an ex-wife or a girlfriend," Diaz guessed. He did not say it lightly. Both men knew how dangerous it could be answering a domestic dispute. The honor roll of dead cops down at the Police Building would attest to it.

Diaz pulled the Plymouth to the curb across the street from the apartment building, checked the address, and nodded to Kettering. It was a rundown section of the Valley separated from the rest of Los Angeles by the Ventura Freeway. The neighborhood was one of auto-repair shops, used-furniture stores, dingy bars, taco stands, and crumbling apartment buildings. Graffiti in the spiky letters of the local street gangs soiled all available wall surfaces like bird droppings.

There was no need for talk now between the detectives. From this point on, training and experience took over.

The building was two floors of flaking gray stucco in a square U shape with a swimming pool between the legs. Standard Southern California 1950s, style. Kettering and Diaz entered the courtyard through a broken iron gate. Dead leaves floated on the pool. Beer cans and fast-food wrappers littered the deck.

A dark, heavy woman sat in a beach chair beside the pool drinking a Pepsi while two children splashed in the shallow end and argued in high-pitched Spanish. The woman's eyes followed the detectives as they entered and climbed the crumbling steps to the second floor.

The apartments on the second floor opened onto a walkway that ran around the inside of the U. Diaz and Kettering made their way around from the stairway and stopped at number 212. They positioned themselves at each side of the door. At a nod from Kettering, Diaz pushed the door-bell button, waited a moment, then knocked.

A voice from inside called, "Who is it?"

"We'd like to talk to you," Diaz said.

"Fuck off."

Diaz and Kettering exchanged a weary look.

"Police," Kettering said through the door. "Open up."

A woman's voice began to shout from within the apartment and was immediately muffled. The detectives drew their guns. Diaz stood to one side. Kettering planted his left foot on the walkway and slammed the bottom of his right size-twelve triple-E into the door just below the knob. The cheap hollow panel splintered and the door slammed open against the inside wall.

Kettering dropped into a combat stance, the S&W Centennial locked in both hands, pointed dead at the two people standing in the center of the living room. Diaz moved quickly in after him and stepped off to one side.

A thin blond man of twenty or so in a tank-top undershirt held a chubby young Latin woman clamped in a choke hold. Sweat pasted the pale hair to his scalp. His eyes had an unnatural glitter. His free hand gripped the handle of a spring-blade knife. The point pricked a spot on the woman's brown neck, bringing a bright bead of blood.

"Drop it," Kettering ordered. "Let the woman go."

"Fuck you, motherfucker."

"Put the knife away, asshole, or you're dead meat."

Diaz edged back toward the doorway. "Come on, Brian." Procedure was clear in this situation. Get out, secure the area, call for backup, wait it out.

"Motherfuckers, get out of my way or I slice up the bitch."

The woman started whimpering. "Don' let him hurt me. I din' know he was crazy. Make him lemme go."

The man twisted the knife, gouging a chunk out of the woman's

plump brown neck. She squealed. A rivulet of blood crawled down over her collarbone.

Kettering thumbed back the hammer of his piece.

"Brian, come *on*," Diaz said.

"I'll cut her, man. I mean it."

"He means it," Diaz said, muscles tense, his eyes on Kettering.

Nerves jumped in Kettering's jaw. His fingers whitened as he gripped the revolver.

"I'm going to blow this asshole away."

The knife dug in a little deeper. The woman's eyes popped.

"Brian," Diaz growled between clenched teeth.

After a long, agonizing moment Kettering relaxed a notch and backed toward the open doorway. With an audible sigh Diaz followed him out. The man inside kicked the broken door shut in their face. A chain lock rattled into place.

"I could have taken him," Kettering said.

"Oh, shit yes. He would have cut her throat before he died. The asshole was stoned out of his mind. You could see that."

"He's going to kill her anyway. He has the look."

"It's not the Screwdriver."

"Not unless he's bleached his hair, lost twenty pounds, and traded his tool for a switchblade."

"I'll cover up here while you call in."

"You call," Kettering said. "I'll cover."

Diaz met his partner's gaze. He opened his mouth to say something more, then changed his mind. He turned and hurried back down the

steps.

From where he stood, Kettering could see the Plymouth parked on the street below. He saw Diaz jog across to the car, reach in for the radio hand mike. He looked up toward Kettering as he spoke into the mike.

There were sounds of movement inside the apartment. Kettering flattened himself close to the door to listen. The woman whimpered once. Kettering ground his teeth and held his position.

Down in the street Diaz stood beside the car. In a couple of minutes the black van of the Special Weapons Assault Team skidded to a stop. Almost immediately behind it came a gaudy blue-and-white mobile unit with CHANNEL 6 HOTLINE NEWS lettered on the side.

"What the fuck?" Kettering muttered. Even if they were monitoring the police frequency, the television people could not have got here this fast. Somebody here in the apartment building must have called them.

Fucking reporters. In Kettering's personal list of worthless creatures, reporters rated somewhere below liberal judges. The *Times* was bad enough in its anti-police bias, but Channel 6 was not far behind.

The SWAT team piled out of the truck in their battle gear and deployed toward the apartment building. A woman with cropped red hair got out of the mobile unit and started arguing with the SWAT leader. A cameraman and technician behind her began taping the scene.

"Goddamn carnival," Kettering said to no one.

The curtains across the apartment window moved. The asshole inside would now have seen the SWAT truck. Shit.

The woman screamed. Not fear this time. Pain. Real Pain.

"Fuck it," Kettering said. He stepped back and put his foot to the broken door again, easily knocking out the screws that held the chain lock in place.

The side of the woman's face was sliced open, showing teeth and jawbone. She was pale and shivering, in shock. The man with the knife held her in front of himself, the point of the blade at her left eyeball.

"Stay away from me, motherfucker!" His voice was shrill and out of control.

Kettering covered the distance from the doorway in two long strides. He jabbed the muzzle of the .38 toward the man's face to hold his attention and simultaneously clamped his fingers onto the wrist of his knife hand. As the man clawed at the gun, Kettering pivoted. There was a loud snap as the man's elbow joint popped.

He screamed. The knife thumped to the carpet.

Kettering had the blond young man facedown with his hands cuffed behind his back when Diaz and members of the SWAT team burst into the room. For a moment everyone stood in silent tableau. Then the wounded woman began to wail and everybody moved at once.

Kettering stood up and eased out of the apartment while the SWAT team and paramedics entered.

The red-haired female reporter came up the stairs and stood beside him on the walkway.

"Anybody dead inside?" she asked.

Kettering looked her up and down. She had a good face, supple body. Tiny crinkles around the eyes would probably keep her from making it as an anchorwoman.

"Not that I noticed," he said. "Disappointed?"

"Why would I be?"

"A body bag being carried out makes a good picture for the eleven o'clock news."

"That's not fair, Sergeant."

"Life isn't fair."

"I just wanted to tell you that was a nice piece of work you did in there."

"How would you know?"

"Your partner told me."

"He talks too much."

Kettering took a better look at her. She was tall, would go about five-eight barefoot, he figured, looked like a swimmer. Good cheekbones. Wild green eyes that could grab you. Her hands, he saw, were empty.

"No microphones?"

"Come on, Sergeant, we have some ethics, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"This wasn't the Screwdriver in there, was it?"

"Damned if I know."

"You don't like me, do you?"

"I don't like what you do for a living."

"Some people would say that about your job too."

"Yeah, like Channel Six news for instance."

"Not all of us follow the party line."

"I'll tune in for details at eleven."

"Try eight o'clock. We're the 'prime-time news channel,' remember?"

"Oh, sure."

"Seriously, give us a chance. You might be surprised."

"I'll need some convincing about that."

She took a card from the pocket of her jacket and handed it to him. "If you've got time one day, I'd like to give it a try."

He took the card and read:

CHARITY MOLINE
CHANNEL 6
HOTLINE NEWS

When he looked up, she was heading back down the steps.

"Hey."

She turned to look back at him.

"It isn't the Screwdriver."

She grinned at him. A real grin, not a coy little smile. "Thanks."

He watched her go on down and take charge of the camera crew. She moved over in front of the building with a microphone and the cameraman began shooting. When the camera tilted up in his direction, Kettering stepped out of range.

***

Lt. Nathan Ivory was fifty-one years old. His hair was white and his face was deeply lined. He had been a policeman for twenty-seven years. He was looking forward with great anticipation to his retirement with all the perks of a thirty-year man. His kids were out of the house now and on their own, he enjoyed good health, he and his wife were still in love. He had the Winnebago picked out in which they would tour the uncrowded parts of the country where crime was something you watched on television. Lieutenant Ivory figured he just about had it made.

What Lieutenant Ivory did not need in the final years of his tenure was problems. Detective Sgt. Brian Kettering was becoming a problem. The lieutenant did not ask him to sit down as he faced Kettering across his battered desk.

"Brian," he said tiredly, "you do know, I presume, the procedures we follow in a hostage situation."

Kettering spread his hands. "Sure, Nate, but - "

"And what you and Diaz had this morning was a hostage situation, am I right?"

"In the strict sense, I suppose - "

"A situation that clearly called for strict adherence to the procedures?"

"Basically yes, but - "

"Basically, my ass. You flat ignored the hostage procedure, is what you did."

"We brought the asshole in."

"Sure you did. Somewhat damaged."

"Is he claiming police brutality?"

"Not yet, but he hasn't talked to a lawyer. As I was saying, in apprehending the suspect you endangered the life of the hostage, the life of your fellow police officers, your partner, and your own miserable life."

"The guy was stoned. He was already starting to cut the woman."

"All the more reason for you to stay the hell out of there. SWAT personnel were already on the scene, I understand."

"By the time they got organized and up there, the woman could have been sliced into cold cuts."

Lieutenant Ivory sighed deeply. "Brian, you're a good cop. Your record is one of the best. I could always count on you not to lose control in a tight spot. What I am saying is, you are not the kind of cop I expect to go cowboying in and take a chance on really messing up."

"Yeah, well ..."

"I remind you that this is not a television show where the hero cop operates like a lone gun and the lieutenant sits in his office grinding his teeth. This is real life, where the lieutenant tells the hero cop what to do and the cop does it. Got that?"

"Got it."

"Good." Ivory stood up and came around the desk. "How are things at home, Brian?"

"Home?"

"You know. The place you stop off between shifts. There's a woman there, I believe. And a teenage boy."

"Things are fine."

Lieutenant Ivory gave him a long, level stare. "Okay, Brian, that's all. Just bag the Dirty Harry stuff, okay?"

Kettering nodded and walked out of the room without saying good-bye.

With the lieutenant's door closed behind him, he took out a wrinkled pack of Marlboros, stuck one in his mouth and lit it. He inhaled deeply and coughed.

"I thought you quit using those things."

Kettering looked up to see Dr. Edmund Protius, the psychiatrist assigned to the West Valley Police, leaning in the doorway of his own office. Protius was thin, balding, with a sharp, shiny nose. He wore a sweater under a tweed jacket winter and summer.

"So I started again. You're not going to lecture me too, are you, Doc?"

Protius hated being called Doc, which was why all the men did it. He dug a pack of Salems out of a jacket pocket and held it up. "I don't think I'm the right man to deliver that lecture."

"Nobody's perfect," Kettering said.

Protius's eyes narrowed. "I hear you had a little action this morning."

"A little."

"Everything okay?"

"Sure. All in the line of duty."

"At home too?"

"People keep asking me that."

"So?"

"Everything's fine. Beautiful."

"Seriously, Brian, any time you want to talk, I'm here."

"What would I want to talk about?"

"How would I know? I'm just saying if you do - "

"I know where to find you."

"Good. Say hello to Mavis for me."

"See you, Doc."

The psychiatrist watched as Kettering clumped on through the bull pen and out toward the street. He shook out a Salem, lit it, and walked off in the other direction.

Chapter 3

As he drove home after the chewing out by Lieutenant Ivory and the invitation from Doc Protius, Kettering made up his mind he would do something about straightening out his homelife. He would sit down with Mavis tonight and talk as long as she wanted to. And he would listen. He promised himself he would listen. By the time he parked the Camaro and crossed the lawn, he was feeling pretty righteous.

Mavis was coming out of the bedroom as Kettering entered the house. She wore a pair of tight floral print pants and a black turtleneck. A loose white sweater jacket was thrown over her shoulders. She looked about twenty-five years old. And she looked happy.

Her body was still good, Kettering saw. But why wouldn't it be? She was only thirty-eight and took good care of herself. There was just the one pregnancy - Trevor. That had been a rough time for Mavis, and they had agreed then to hold the family at three.

Mavis was wearing her hair soft and loose tonight, the way Kettering used to like it. She had not worn it that way for a long time. Her eyes were bright, alive. He could remember when her eyes shone like that whenever she looked at him. Now he only saw it when she was going out. Alone. Kettering really wanted to say something nice to her, but he couldn't get it past his throat.

What came out was, "Going somewhere?"

"This is my class night. There's a casserole for you in the fridge. The bowl with the plastic wrap covering it. All you have to do is pop it in the microwave."

"What class is that?" he asked.

Mavis exhaled sharply. "My arts class with Gabrielle Wister. Same night every week. I've been going for almost two months."

"I don't remember you telling me."

"Maybe if you listened once in a while ..."

"What do you need with an art class?"

"Arts. Plural. I used to make jewelry when we were first married. Remember that? I was pretty good at it. A lot of my friends asked why I didn't sell the stuff. I thought maybe I'd brush up my talent and give it a try now."

"I still don't see what you need the class for."

She faced him, her jaw set. "Because I have to *do* something, Brian. There isn't enough here in the house to keep me busy for half the day. You don't need me. Trevor's gone most of the time. I need something that's mine. Just mine."

Right then what he should have said was: *I do need you, Mavis. I need you so bad I ache for you. I need you to listen to the ugly stories of all the ugly things I see every day, the rotten things I have to do. I need you to tell me it's okay. I'm okay. I need you to be the girl I married again.*

That's what he should have said. But he could no more get those words out than he could right now take into his arms the woman his wife had become.

"So where is Trevor, anyway? I hardly see him since school let out."

"He's got a job for the summer, working nights."

"A job? Our Trevor?"

"That's what I said. A job."

"I didn't know that. How come nobody mentions these things to me?"

"Brian, you may not know it, but you're not that accessible to us."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He saw her expression. "Never mind, what's this job he's got?"

Mavis shrugged. "It's nights at some club on Creighton Street. A place where the kids go."

"What kind of club?"

"I don't know. Rock music, dancing. Strictly for the younger crowd. It's called The Hole or The Pit ... something like that."

"What's Trevor doing there?"

"You'll have to ask him. I would think you'd be pleased that he's earning some money."

He massaged his brow and headed for the kitchen. "The money's not important. The kid's been acting weird lately. I don't like it."

"You're still mad about his haircut."

"That's just one thing."

Kettering walked out to the kitchen and poured himself a bourbon on the rocks. He raised his voice so Mavis could hear him in the other room.

"His grades have been really crappy this last year. He's going to have to go to junior college to bring them up enough to get into UCLA, or even Valley State."

He walked back out to the living room. Mavis was edging toward the door, looking eager to be away.

She said, "His grades weren't that bad."

"He can do better. And he hasn't been hanging out with his old friends lately. Who's he spending his time with?"

"I know he's down at the club a lot," Mavis said.

"I hardly ever see him. And when he is home, he sits in his room and plays that garbage music on his stereo. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was doing dope."

"Dope? Trevor? You think he'd touch the stuff with a cop for a father?"

"Let me tell you, strange things can happen to policemen's kids." In a softer voice he added, "Preacher's kids too."

"Trevor's all right. It's just the usual teenage rebellion thing."

"Yeah, well, something's happening to him. Something I don't like."

"So talk to him," she said. "You're the father."

"Yeah." He looked down into the glass, clinked the ice cubes against the sides.

Mavis was at the door now with her hand on the knob. "I'm going to be late," she said. "We can talk about it tomorrow."

"Matter of fact, you've been acting kind of funny too."

"Brian, I've got to go."

"Go then." It came out harsher than he had intended.

She opened the door.

He said, "Maybe I'll have a look in his room."

"You mean search his things?"

"Since he won't volunteer any information, it's one way to find out what's going on with him."

"You wouldn't do that to a criminal without a search warrant."

"That's different. Criminals are protected by the courts. Civil rights stop at my front door."

"You talk like a real Nazi sometimes, you know that?"

"I'm a cop."

Mavis started an angry reply, cut it off. "Speaking of our front door, you'd better have a look at it. We seem to have a graffiti artist in the neighborhood."

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't see it when you came in?"

"It was dark and I wasn't paying attention."

"Take a look." She opened the door and pulled it wide so he could see the outer face in the light.

From the top of the door all the way to the bottom, in a crude but powerful smear of dark red, was the hunch-shouldered figure from his dreams. And from his childhood. The talons at the end of the long arms seemed to twitch as Kettering stared.

Doomstalker.

No spray can had done this, and no brush. It was like a great red splatter that had somehow fallen in this sinister shape. But Kettering knew it was no accident. Anyway, *how* it got there was not as important as *why*.

Iced bourbon spilled out over his hand. Kettering looked down, surprised to see that the hand was shaking. He swallowed the rest of the drink quickly and set the glass on a table inside the door.

"When did this happen?" he demanded.

"I don't know. Sometime today."

"You didn't see anybody outside? Hear anything?"

"Nothing unusual."

"Damn it, you must have noticed something. You were here all day."

Mavis flared at him. "Of course I was here all day. I'm here all day

every day. And every night. I don't have a job to escape to."

"Don't get excited. I just asked if you saw who did this to our door."

"I don't make a note of every odd noise and every stranger who walks down the sidewalk. If that's what you want, why don't you hire a detective?"

She left him standing beside the open door and marched stiffly across the lawn to her little car. She got in, slammed the door with unnecessary force, raced the motor, and sped off into the night.

Kettering watched until the taillights of the Honda disappeared around the corner. He looked again at the ominous crimson shape and swore through clenched teeth. Leaving the door open, he headed for the kitchen.

An hour later, after he had scrubbed the wooden panel with detergent, solvent, and bleach, the shadow of the Doomstalker remained. He would have to sand down the door and repaint it. Or buy a new door. The headache was pounding at his temples. He knew. Somehow, he just knew that even if he erased the hellish image from the door, the Doomstalker would never go away.

It was coming for him.

With an effort Kettering fought down the terrors of childhood and the ugly half-remembered scenes that were stirred up by the angry red image. He tried to kid himself into believing it was merely juvenile graffiti. He directed his anger at the disintegration of his neighborhood and all the other neighborhoods that had once been nice places to live. He raged inwardly at the bleeding-heart judges who kept letting juvenile criminals out "to the custody of their parents." What a laugh. If the little scum-suckers actually had parents, they didn't give a shit what their kids did. A no-win situation if ever there was one.

It was no use. Kettering knew this was not the work of some punk with a spray can. No use pretending that it was.

He closed the door and rolled the dead bolt home. Tomorrow he

would work some more on cleaning off the panel. He retreated to his refuge, the creaky old recliner.

With the remote-control unit he punched on the television and cycled through the channels. There were reruns of sitcoms that weren't funny the first time around. There was yet another show about a cool black cop and a comical white cop. A TV movie with Ed Asner taking on society's problems. Alan Thicke was hosting some trivial awards show. Something British and boring on PBS. News ...

Wait a minute. A familiar face looked back at him from the newscast. The girl reporter with the cropped red hair stood out in front of the stucco apartment building where the hostage thing had gone down that day. She was holding a sponge-ball hand mike. The sun was bright in her eyes, making her squint slightly. Kettering mentally gave the woman points for not switching the shot around so she could look better on camera.

"Today in this unpretentious apartment in West Valley, a potentially dangerous situation was defused by the courageous work of a Valley policeman. Sergeant Brian Kettering entered an apartment alone where a suspect was holding a woman hostage at knife point. Because of the sergeant's swift response, the suspect was captured and the woman freed with minor injuries. Too often efficient police work like this is overlooked in the media's haste to find fault with our law-enforcement people. This is Charity Moline, Hotline News, returning you to the Channel Six studios in Hollywood."

The buttery-voiced anchorman came on and Kettering punched the screen to darkness. He checked his watch. Quarter to nine. Charity Moline's report was taped this afternoon. She probably would not be at the television studio at this hour.

He walked out to where his coat hung over the back of a dining room chair. The business card was in the pocket where he'd dropped it and forgotten about it. No, he admitted, he hadn't forgotten about it at all.

The card bore two telephone numbers. One was the Channel 6 number in Hollywood, the other had a North Hollywood prefix. Not

that far from West Valley. Kettering punched out the digits and listened to the burr of the phone ringing on the other end.

"Hello?" She had a good voice. Just a touch husky, without the breathiness affected by so many women.

"Charity Moline?"

"Well, hello, Sergeant."

"You've got a good ear."

"It's part of my business."

"I saw your report on Channel Six just now."

"Oh?" She wasn't helping him any.

"Well, hell, I guess what I called for was to say thanks."

"I just told the folks what happened."

"And I'm sorry if I was abrupt with you today."

"You're entitled."

A long five seconds ticked past.

"I was wondering, well, would you like to have a drink someplace?"

"You mean tonight?"

"Yeah. Tonight."

"Sure."

"You know the Rose and Dragon on Ventura?"

"I know it."

"Half an hour?"

"See you there."

When he hung up the phone, Kettering was sweating. After eighteen years of marriage he had just made his first real date with another woman. Sure, there had been an occasional groupie from the local cop's hangout, but this was different. What did he have in mind?

No time to think about that now. Kettering hurried to the bathroom to grab a quick shave.

Chapter 4

The Rose and Dragon was a typical English pub as visualized by the typical Southern California entrepreneur. The exterior was done in an approximation of Tudor style with white stucco walls crisscrossed by dark beams.

Kettering parked the Camaro in the lot and entered through the heavy door. In the center of the oak panel was a brass shield bearing a coat of arms that did not mean anything.

He walked past the hostess who was taking reservations and went into the bar. It was dark and comfortable, and not busy on a weeknight.

Behind the long bar were ads for Watney's Red Lion and Guinness stout. And a dart board. After that the designer apparently tired of the England motif and reverted to Ventura Boulevard Modern.

There were round, high-backed booths in comfortable red vinyl that provided a little privacy for those who wanted it. On each table was a candle in a red-glass chimney. The dinner menu specialized in steaks and prime rib, the bar provided good honest drinks.

At a piano bar a woman with a hard face and stiff blond hair played an endless repertoire of show tunes with no visible show of emotion.

Kettering stood for a moment scanning the customers as his eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light. Most of the crowd appeared to be regulars - casually dressed Valley people taking a break from their designer kitchens and patio barbecues. One long table was occupied by a loud group of aerospace employees who were either celebrating a new government contract or lamenting a

general layoff.

Kettering had deliberately chosen a place where he seldom went and was not likely to be recognized. Not that he was doing anything really wrong, he reminded himself, but it could be an awkward moment if he ran into anybody who knew him or Mavis. *Conscience makes cowards,* he thought.

He made his way to the bar, took a stool, and ordered Wild Turkey on the rocks. He dipped a handful of peanuts from a bowl on the bar and munched thoughtfully.

He was feeling ridiculously nervous. Like a high school kid on his first date. Did high school kids still get nervous? Kettering wondered. Nowadays they seemed to be born knowing all about sex and drugs and related pleasures. But maybe it was all a facade.

Back in the prehistoric times of the early sixties, when he was in high school, Kettering would rather have died than let on he was still a virgin, which he was until his eighteenth birthday. On that occasion several of his buddies from the football team had taken him to a Milwaukee whorehouse and chipped in for his first piece of ass. The woman was on the downhill side of thirty and not real enthusiastic about taking on a kid, but she had enough expertise to make young Brian Kettering believe he had just had the premier screw of all time.

He saw Charity Moline in the mirror behind the bar when she came in. She was wearing a silk, summery dress that was belted at her waist. That waist, he thought, couldn't be much more than twenty inches. Her hair was shiny and had a bounce, as though she had just washed it.

She smiled at him in the mirror and came over. He swiveled on the stool to greet her.

"I'm not late, am I?"

"No. I was a little early." He did not add that he had deliberately slowed himself down after showering, shaving for the second time today, and putting on his one good sport coat, which had cost him

$300 on sale at Dorman-Winthrop. "Do you want to get a booth?"

"No, the bar's fine." She eased onto the stool next to his with a whisper of silk. "What are you drinking?"

"Wild Turkey."

"That's good bourbon," she said. "I'll have one of those."

"Really?"

"Sure. What did you expect me to order, a strawberry margarita?"

"I don't know. I'd have guessed white wine."

"That's for insecure females who are afraid of what they might do if they had a real drink."

"You're not?"

"Not insecure or not afraid?"

"Either one."

"I think I can handle it."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

With a tingle of pleasure Kettering realized they were going through the opening steps of the mating dance. When he overheard conversations like this, he had always thought they sounded juvenile and inane. It was different, he discovered, when you were one of the players.

He signaled the bartender. It pleased him that Charity Moline did not make the usual token offer to pay for her own drink. There were times when a wise woman let a man be a man.

They toasted each other and drank slowly. She smiled her appreciation of the bourbon. He lit a cigarette. She declined to take one, but went up another notch in his estimation when she did not frown or fan the smoke away.

"So," she said, "why are we here, Sergeant?"

Caught off balance, he quickly recovered. "My wife went out tonight to some class she's taking. My kid's somewhere goofing off. There was nothing good on TV. I was alone and I was bored."

"And you thought of me."

"Not right away."

"Uh-huh." She peered up at him through dark lashes. "Problems at home, Sergeant?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"If you say so."

"You don't really want to hear about my problems, do you?"

"Not unless you want to tell me."

He glanced at her hand. She wore several rings but none on the wedding finger.

"You're not married?"

"Not anymore."

"Kids?"

"Nope. That was lucky, as things turned out."

"Bad scene?"

"I thought so at the time. I was married at twenty to the best-looking guy I'd ever seen outside the movies. I mean, he was gorgeous. The trouble was, I was maybe three times as smart as he."

"What happened?"

"He met a topless dancer whose tits were bigger than mine. When I told him he had to make a choice, he chose her."

"You're right, he wasn't very smart."

"Thanks, but I've got to admit the dancer was really something. Boobs to make a man cry. The two of them rode off together on his motorcycle and I haven't seen him since. The best thing he did for me was not to leave me with a kid."

"So now you're a television newslady."

"At the moment. I like the business, but I want to get into the writing end. Doing thirty-second bites on camera doesn't give much chance for in-depth journalism."

"You look good on camera, though."

"Sure I do. That's how I got the job. But I don't want to spend the next few years searching the face in the mirror for the wrinkles that will put me back on the street."

He groped for something to say. "I like the way you handled the story today."

"I'm a reporter, Sergeant. I won't kid you that there aren't people at Channel Six who are into cop bashing. It's a popular sport in my business. But like I told you, I don't play that game."

"That's good to know."

"So what really happened there today? What made you go in that apartment alone? I know that's not the way the book says you're supposed to handle it."

"That's the point my lieutenant made. Vigorously. Do you really want to hear about it?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

Kettering downed his drink and ordered another for both of them. He found himself talking easily to this red-haired young woman, not only about his actions with the blade artist today, but about other cases and other cops, and about his feelings about being one of them. He told her how it felt to hold the head of a six-year-old

girl in his lap and watch the light go out of her eyes as she died of a gunshot wound. He talked about the sleepless nights that followed the one and only time he had to kill somebody. A doped-up crazy punk who just robbed a 7-Eleven was firing his Uzi at anything that moved. Kettering brought him down with a single bullet through the eye socket.

"Pretty good shooting," Charity said.

"No it wasn't. I was diving for cover, just aiming in his general direction to keep him occupied."

"And it bothered you afterward that you killed him? Even though you may have saved several lives?"

"Sure it bothered me. I don't say there aren't a lot of people on the streets who deserve to die, but killing somebody doesn't feel good."

Charity talked some more about how she had left home early after her stepfather put some unfatherly moves on her. She married the handsome dunce, and when it ended a year later, she worked her way through college as an all-night disc jockey on a little station in Tucson. A degree from the University of Arizona in communications got her nothing much, but her looks got her a job as weather girl on a TV station in Bakersfield. She was offered a co-anchor spot there, but took the Channel 6 job because the Los Angeles market held bigger possibilities.

Sometime during the evening, without either of them suggesting it, Kettering and Charity Moline moved over to the piano bar. While the hard-faced blonde played Cole Porter songs, Charity talked with wit and intelligence about her life in the high-tension world of television. Kettering found himself enjoying her and laughing easily at her stories of misadventures among the celebrities.

It seemed completely natural when she put a hand on his arm to emphasize a point. There was nothing outwardly suggestive in the gesture, but it sent a jolt through Kettering's nervous system.

The piano lady hit a series of descending chords. "That's it for tonight, folks." She scooped the bills and change from the brandy

snifter. "You've got time for a last call. This gal's outta here."

Kettering checked his watch. "I don't believe it. We just got here, didn't we?"

Charity smiled her good smile at him. "Time flies when you're having fun."

They stood up. Kettering pulled out his wadded bills and paid the cocktail waitress. Suddenly uncomfortable, he looked at Charity.

Her eyes were clear and green and innocent of coquetry. "I guess we can't go to your place."

He shook his head.

"So why don't you follow me to mine?"

Like everything else about tonight's encounter, the suggestion seemed natural and inevitable to Kettering, although he would have sworn that going home with Charity Moline was the furthest thing from his intentions when he set out from home.

"Where are you parked?" he said.

"Over there."

She pointed at a silver-gray Mazda RX-7 across the parking lot.

"Nice car."

"I've got to spend my salary on something."

"I'll pull up behind you." Kettering watched appreciatively as she swung across the lot to her car. She had the free, long-legged stride of today's independent woman, but the roll of her ass was a constant reminder of her femininity.

He turned and headed for his own car, and was suddenly overcome with a sensation of bone-chilling cold. A huge shadow seemed to darken the parking-lot lights. Traffic sounds from the boulevard dropped to a whisper.

Kettering's mind raced. He was seized by a feeling of unreasoning dread. For an instant he wondered if he were having a heart attack.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the sensation was gone. The lights of the parking lot were as bright as before. Traffic on Ventura produced the usual noise level. And the night was warm, but still Kettering shivered. He looked over to see the lights of the Mazda come on as Charity started the engine. He gave her a wave and continued to his own car.

Kettering eased in behind the wheel and took several deep breaths before starting the Camaro. When he was back in control, he drove up behind Charity. She gave him a beep on the horn and took off.

Charity drove the sports car with confidence, not dawdling, yet not showing off with fancy cornering moves. As he followed her up into the hills above the Hollywood Freeway, Kettering reflected that the Mazda was high on the desirable list for car thieves. He hoped she had a secure place to park it.

She lived in a stone cottage on one of the small streets that twisted up off Laurel Canyon. The house had a kind of Walt Disney look, with rounded roof corners and a profusion of flowers all around it which, even at night, gave off an intoxicating fragrance.

Charity parked the Mazda on the street with no special precautions, but somehow Kettering felt it would be safe there. Who would dare steal a car from such a woman from in front of such an enchanted cottage?

He slid the dusty Camaro in behind her and got out, aware of how shabby his car looked next to hers. He resolved to leave it at the police garage for a wash job tomorrow.

Charity Moline came back and took his hand and led him up the flagstone steps to the little house. He forgot all about his car.

She keyed open the front door and they went in. The single lamp she had left burning revealed a cozy, comfortable living room with lots of throw pillows and soft chairs and colorful rugs. The wall had a large abstract painting. To Kettering's eye it looked like a spill on

the floor of a restaurant kitchen. The room was clean but not especially tidy. A pair of running shoes stood beside one of the chairs. Magazines covered the tabletops. Books were stacked everywhere.

Charity cut short his inventory as she turned to face him. They stood facing each other for no more than a second. She came naturally into his arms and he kissed her. There was no pretense of holding back. When they kissed, her tongue slipped into his mouth with an easy familiarity. Her small, round breasts mashed against his chest. When the kiss ended, they were both breathing hard.

"Do you want a drink?" she said.

He shook his head.

"The bedroom's back this way."

Kettering followed her. On the way he peeled off his $300 sport jacket and tossed it over a chair. He had his shirt off by the time they reached the bed. Charity gently pushed him down and finished the job of undressing him.

When they were naked in each other's arms, Charity said, "You may not believe it, Sergeant, but I don't do this a lot."

"Neither do I," he said.

Her eyes glittered in the semidarkness. She pulled away from him, just a little bit. "Are you very sure you want to do it now?"

"Come back here."

The time for talk was over. Kettering rolled her over onto her back. She opened her legs for him and he knelt between them. He clamped his hands on her smooth, firm buttocks, and pulled her to him. She took him into her with a sharp intake of breath. She closed around him like a wet satin fist.

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Afterwards he lay on his back, eyes closed, breathing deeply. She

used a forefinger to make little splashes in the sweat that had pooled in his navel.

"Aren't you going to ask if it was good for me?" she said.

He opened one eye and looked at her. "You mean it's supposed to be good for the woman?"

"Hah." She tweaked his nose and lay down beside him. "I could tell how it was for you," she said. "It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

"Awhile. I've got to go."

"You'd better take a shower here. Wives can always smell another woman."

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Why, Kettering wondered on the way home, did he not feel a greater sense of guilt? He had just committed flagrant adultery. He had been unfaithful. He had broken his marriage vows. As he drove unhurriedly through the sparse traffic, he felt only a fine sense of being satisfied. His foremost concern was when and how he would again see Charity Moline.

"Face it," he told himself, "I'm a bastard." He decided that when Mavis questioned his whereabouts, he would tell her the truth. There would be justified anger, recriminations, maybe tears. Afterwards she would forgive him, or she would not. He would play it either way.

The house was dark and silent when he entered. The door to Trevor's room was closed. Kettering put down an impulse to look in on him as he had when the boy was little. There had been a warm father-son friendship then for a couple of short years. Where had it gone? he wondered. Did all fathers wonder the same thing?

Mavis was curled on her side in her customary fetal sleeping position. She moaned softly in her sleep when Kettering came into the room, but did not stir.

He went to the bathroom and undressed without taking any special

care to be quiet. When he had hung up his clothes and pulled on the pajama bottoms he slept in, he stood at the bedside looking down at his wife. She still had not awakened. He cleared his throat loudly.

Mavis rolled over and looked up at him. "Oh, hi," she said raggedly. "You're home pretty late."

Well, here it comes, he thought. *Let's take it like a man.*

"Yeah, it's after three."

"I know. Well, come to bed."

"Almost three-thirty."

"You have to be up in four hours, so come to bed."

"I didn't mean to wake you," he lied.

"Don't worry about it."

She turned her back to him again. Her breathing deepened and became regular, and Kettering knew she was asleep again.

What the hell, don't you even care if I was out fucking another woman?

Kettering smiled grimly at the realization that he was really looking to be punished and Mavis had cheated him out of it.

I am turning weird, he thought. *Maybe I should go see Doc Protius.*

And he slept, his dreams filled with the sensual memories of Charity Moline.

Chapter 5

The office occupied by Dr. Edmund Protius was on the second floor of the West Valley Police Building. It was, by design, more comfortable and less formal than those of the police officials. The desk was an antique of deep-shined cherry wood. It held a calendar, an oversize ashtray, a cup full of pens and pencils, and framed photos of the doctor's wife and two children.

The chairs were comfortable creaky leather. The colors of the office were masculine and designed to relax the visitor - muted brown and maroon. On the wall were prints of seascapes and rolling meadowlands.

There was no psychiatric couch, the books on the shelf were not medical texts, no white-enamel drug cabinet marked this as the office of a doctor. It might have been the work space of a smalltown banker, or a real estate man who specialized in middle-class homes.

It was difficult to be ill at ease in the relaxing atmosphere of this office, but Sgt. Brian Kettering was managing it.

The detective prowled the room, touched the books, studied the prints, peered out the window at the patch of green in the park next door. He lit a Marlboro, drew in a lungful of smoke, cleared his throat.

Dr. Protius, meanwhile, leaned back comfortably in the burgundy leather high-backed swivel chair and waited for him to speak first.

"This is probably a mistake," Kettering said. "I'm just taking up your time."

"Sure you are. What of it? That's what the city pays me for. Why

don't you sit down before you wear out my carpet."

Kettering dropped into one of the chairs with a weary sigh. Protius swiveled to face him.

"What's on your mind, Brian?"

"You remember when I saw you in the hall yesterday?"

"Uh-huh."

"You asked me how things were at home, and I told you fine?"

"I think that was your description. Also 'beautiful.'"

"I lied."

"That so?"

"Things are a mess."

"Ah." Dr. Protius placed his fingertips together and pursed his lips.

"Do you have to do that wise-doctor pose?" Kettering said.

"Sorry." Protius unpursed his lips and leaned back, folding his hands across his chest.

"I slept with another woman last night." Kettering got the words out in a burst and waited. "Not my wife."

"Is that supposed to shock me or something?" Protius said at last.

"I don't know."

"I've been working with cops for five years. Marital hanky-panky is not exactly foreign to my ears."

"Okay, so you've heard it before." Kettering sulked.

"Or do you want me to give you absolution? Hey, I'm not the chaplain. Just what is it you're looking for, Brian?"

"I don't know," he said again. "Last night I had the feeling what I wanted was for Mavis to get mad. Yell at me. Throw me out. React somehow. I don't think she gave a damn where I was or what I was doing."

Protius said nothing.

Kettering cleared his throat again. "Anyway, it's not the problem at home that brings me here. I can handle that. And it's not the business yesterday with that knife artist."

"So what are you doing here, Brian?"

"It's the thing on my door."

"On your door," the doctor repeated.

"Something like the shape of a man. Only not a man. In red."

"Red paint?"

"I guess."

The doctor prompted him gently. "In the shape of a man, you say."

"Sort of a man. Only not really. Ugly. Ominous." Kettering ground out his cigarette and looked into the serious eyes of the doctor. "Something weird is happening to me, Ed."

"You're sure it wasn't gang graffiti? We're starting to get more of that junk in the Valley."

"No, nothing like that. I just wish it were. This was a message meant for me. Personally."

"How do you know that?"

"I can't answer that. I just know."

"Okay. Tell me what you felt when you saw it."

"I felt like ... it found me."

"What found you?"

Kettering started to answer, closed his mouth. Finally he said, "I don't know. Something."

"What did you almost say?"

"Nothing. Just foolishness."

"Let me be the judge of that, okay?"

"When I was a kid I had a ... I guess you'd call it a personal boogeyman. I called it ... aah, this is silly."

"Come on, Brian. You've made it this far. Let's hear the rest of it."

"I called it the Doomstalker." Kettering faced the doctor, challenging him. "Some imagination, huh?"

Protius ignored the question. "Where did it come from?"

"An uncle of mine used to tell me stories about it."

"He gave it the name?"

"I don't remember if it was him or if I did after my father ..."

Dr. Protius waited ten seconds before saying, "After your father what?"

"He died."

"Mm-hmm."

"I, uh, I saw him die. Sort of."

"Tell me about it."

"You've got time?"

"I've got as much time as you have."

Kettering lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply, coughed, put it out.

He leaned back in the chair and fixed his gaze on a spot above the psychiatrist's head.

"Actually, I don't remember all that much. It was a church picnic. You knew my father was a minister?"

Protius nodded.

"I was at the picnic with my mother and my sister Jessie. I was six years old ..."

Protius listened without comment as Kettering spoke haltingly about the long-ago summer day. He told of being sent home with the message for his father. "... I was in a hurry to get back to the picnic. I remember I ran all the way home, but even before I got there I started feeling funny ... scared."

"Scared of what?"

"I don't know. There was no reason. But I remember feeling that something really bad was going to happen."

"And did it?"

"Yeah. My father died. And I saw it. I think."

"You think?"

"Everything gets hazy after I went up on the porch. It's like a dream I can almost remember, but not quite."

"Tell me as much as you can remember," said the doctor.

Kettering shrugged. "There isn't much more. There were voices. My father sounded ... different than I'd ever heard him. He was swearing, and he never swore. I mean, he was a minister."

"You said voices. Plural."

"Did I?"

"How many voices?"

"Two." Kettering looked at him sharply. "How did I remember that?"

"Who was the other voice?"

"I don't know."

"Close your eyes. Try to hear it again."

Kettering closed his eyes, opened them almost immediately. "It's no use. I don't remember."

The doctor pinned him with his sharp gray eyes. "Was it the voice of the Doomstalker?"

One eyelid twitched just before Kettering gave a loud, unconvincing bark of laughter. "How would I know?" He sobered. "Doc, I told you the Doomstalker was just a name I put to a story told by my uncle."

"Right. And the thing on your door, is that a made-up story?"

"No."

"So what's the connection?"

"That's what I was hoping you could tell me."

"It doesn't work that way, Brian. All I can do is try to help you remember what you already know."

"For that you went to twelve years of medical school?"

"Something like that."

The two men sat without speaking for several minutes.

Kettering moved as though to rise. "I guess that's it. Thanks, Doc."

"Sit down a minute."

Kettering obeyed, surprised at the sudden authority in the doctor's voice.

"How have you been feeling physically?"

"Fine. Well, I've had headaches lately. A little trouble sleeping."

"Starting when?"

"I don't know. About a month ago."

"Anything special happen then?"

"No. Well, things got a little chilly between Mavis and me. No big thing, just the usual husband and wife stuff."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing I can think of."

"Nothing related to your childhood in Indiana?"

"Nah. I've got no connections to Prescott. Haven't even thought about the town in a long time."

Dr. Protius shook a Salem out of the pack. He leaned forward across the desk. "Got a light?"

Kettering dug a book of matches out of his pants pocket. As he handed the matchbook across the desk, his right hand began to quiver, then to shake violently. The matchbook fell to the desk. Kettering grabbed the wrist with his left hand and held on until the other steadied.

"What was that?" Protius said.

"What was what?"

"Come on, Brian, don't fuck around with me. That tremor. Do you get it often?"

Kettering looked down at his hands, rock steady now. He spread his fingers and turned the hands over, studying their backs. "It's nothing," he said. "Just nerves."

"Oh yes? And where did you get your medical degree?"

Kettering picked up the book of matches, struck one, and held the

flame steady for him. "That's a nasty habit. You really ought to quit."

Protius lit the cigarette and inhaled. "I will if you will."

The two men sat in silence for another thirty seconds. Telephones jangled softly in the other offices. From outside the window came the muted roar of a leaf blower. The air conditioner sighed.

Finally Dr. Protius spoke. "I'd give you odds there's some connection between your current problems and what happened when you were six."

"If anything *really* happened," Kettering said.

"You have some doubts now?"

"Hell, Doc, I have nothing but doubts. There's a lot I don't remember, and the little I do remember is like something photographed through a distorting lens."

Protius leaned across the desk and fixed him with a sharp gaze. "Do you *want* to remember, Brian?"

"Sure, if it will help."

"I can't guarantee, but it might. Are you willing to try hypnosis?"

"I don't know. I don't like the idea of losing control."

"It's not like that. You've been to the lectures about hypnotizing witnesses to help them remember details."

"Yeah. I guess I never thought about it being done to me."

"Well? What do you say?"

"Would you be the one to do it?"

"Yes."

"I'll have to think about it, Doc."

"Do you want something for those headaches and that ..." He pantomimed the shaking of Kettering's hand. "... attack of nerves?"

"No thanks. I don't like to take pills."

"Whatever you say. You know where to find me."

Kettering stood up. "I wish I could tell you our talk made me feel a whole lot better."

"You don't?"

"Nope."

"So take a couple of aspirin and call me in the morning."

Kettering grinned at him. "Thanks, Doc. You tried."

He walked out of the office with Protius frowning after him.

Chapter 6

Kettering left the Police Building in a dark mood. The talk with Dr. Protius had raised more problems than it had solved. Now he couldn't get that June day thirty-seven years ago out of his mind. Uncle Art rode home with him. Uncle Art ... and the Doomstalker.

When he drove up and parked in his driveway, an illogical sense of dread dropped on him like a cold blanket. Something here was out of place. The atmosphere was wrong.

For one thing, Mavis's Honda was parked out in front of the house instead of in the garage where it ought to be at this hour. Things at home that varied from the routine disturbed him. His work provided enough surprises.

He left the Camaro in the driveway and walked along the flagstones beside Mavis's flower beds to the front door. As he crossed the stoop he caught himself looking down at his shoes, off to the left, off to the right ... anyplace but at the front door.

Kettering came to a stop and willed himself to stand back and look at what he did not want to see. The facing panel of the door was scrubbed clean, but as he knew it would, the shadow of the figure with the hunched shoulders and taloned fingers was still there.

From somewhere deep in his memory came an incantation he had used as a child to ward off the bad things. "You won't get me, you won't get me, you won't get me, you sonofabitch," he muttered, and walked inside.

Mavis was sitting under a lamp in a wing chair, facing the door. Her hands rested in her lap. She wore a pair of tight designer jeans and a bulky knit sweater.

She looked damn good, and Kettering wanted to tell her so. However, her grim expression froze the words before he could get them out.

"Hi," he said.

"I'm glad you're home on time tonight because I want to talk to you."

"Fine. Does it have to be before dinner?"

"I haven't much time," she said. "I'm going out."

"Again?"

"Again."

Kettering's protest died in his throat. Considering that he had spent last night in the bed of another woman, he was in no position to complain about his wife's comings and goings.

"Another class."

"The same one."

She was challenging him to question her. To object. He was determined to remain above combat.

"Where do they hold this class, anyway?"

"At Gabrielle's house. In Sherman Oaks."

"Yeah. Well ..." He searched for something to say. The best he could manage was, "Do you expect to be home late?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

She *had* to know about last night. About him and Charity Moline. Wives have a detection system that sets off an alarm if their husbands go anywhere near another woman. That had to be what all this frosty conversation was about. Kettering wished she would come out with an open accusation. Then he could confess and they

could get on to the penalty phase. This icy dialogue made his teeth ache.

"Okay," he said. When that seemed insufficient he added, "Have a good time."

"Brian, I want a divorce."

Smack. The word hit him like a wet towel across the face. It should not have been all that much of a surprise, yet it staggered him.

"Shouldn't we talk about it?" His voice was husky. He had to clear his throat to get the words out.

"Not now. Not tonight. Maybe not anytime. It's too late for talk. I think you know all my reasons, and I know all your arguments."

"Have you talked to Trevor?"

"I told him. Tell you the truth, I don't think it much matters to him. He's pretty well pulled out of the family anyway."

"He's seventeen."

"He's eighteen, and that's legally an adult. God, you don't even know the age of your own son."

"I knew, I just forgot. Anyway, as long as he's living here - "

"Brian, I really don't want to discuss this anymore. I've got to go."

"This class of yours is all that important? And this Gabrielle ... what's her name?"

"Gabrielle Wister."

"Whatever. This means more to you than talking about our marriage?"

"Yes." One icy syllable.

In spite of his resolve, Kettering started to get mad. Hell, maybe she *was* in the right, but her air of superiority rankled him.

"What if I said you're going to sit here and listen to me?"

"I guess you could force me if you wanted to."

No contest. She had kept her cool, and she was the winner.

"So go," he said.

Mavis stood up and walked past him toward the door. He had a crazy impulse to grab her and say something stupid like, *You can't do this!*

But she *could* do this, and she *was* doing it. Moreover, deep down somewhere Brian knew it was right. Whatever they once had together wasn't there anymore. It had gotten misplaced somewhere, without him ever really noticing. The strain of the last month had just emphasized the bad situation that had existed for a long time.

He stood aside and watched silently as his wife went out and closed the door behind her. The latch fell into place with a click of finality.

Left alone in the silent house, Kettering walked around turning out lights that nobody was using. That made it too dark, so he walked around again turning them back on. The house seemed not so empty with the lights on. He went into the kitchen, opened the liquor cupboard, and stood for a moment contemplating the Wild Turkey.

For a moment he savored the image of himself sitting there putting down the bourbon, wounded, alone, aloof and mysterious. When Mavis came back he could roll his lip back over his upper teeth like Bogart in *Casablanca* and say, "I saved my first drink to have with you."

No good. He was no Bogart. He was not a solitary drinker, and he was not a misery drinker. Kettering admitted to plenty of faults, but careless use of booze was not one of them.

He closed the liquor cupboard and walked into the den. There he sagged wearily into the old recliner. It creaked and settled in the familiar way, but this time the chair failed to deliver the old reassurance.

Kettering grabbed the remote-control unit and punched on the television set. He found a rerun of the old *Three's Company* sitcom, muted the sound, and sat watching Suzanne Somers's breasts while he thought back over the years that had brought him to this melancholy place.

In almost twenty years of marriage he could summon up only a handful of vivid memories.

There was his first sight of Mavis in the city hall of Columbus, Ohio. It was in the cafeteria. Mavis was carrying her lunch on a tray, and she looked so pretty and so vulnerable that Brian's heart lurched in his chest.

She was a secretary in the district attorney's office and he was a rookie policeman. He was fresh out of Ohio State, feeling like a real hotshot with his brand-new police science degree and his shiny new badge and pistol. He had plans for his future that did not include immediate marriage. Such plans, he soon learned, had a way of going awry.

He made it a point to arrange a casual meeting. She was seated behind her IBM Selectric when he walked in with some excuse to see the D.A. They made small talk. The earth did not move. His knees did not shake. But he could not get her out of his mind. His thoughts, if not poetically romantic, were at least to the point: *a great-looking chick. I wonder if she can be had.*

It turned out she could, but not without a promise of marriage. To Brian's surprise, he found himself delivering such a promise on their fifth date.

Another surprise was the birth of their first and, as it turned out, only child. Kettering was just beginning to attract attention in the department, they were living fairly comfortably on their combined salaries. Unlike Mavis, who craved motherhood, Kettering was in no hurry to add to his responsibilities a small, loud, damp, demanding stranger. Mavis was supposed to be on the pill, but she "forgot" a time or two, and what do you know, it was too late. Hello baby, good-bye romance.

Kettering rubbed his eyes, thinking back. What else was there? Good things to remember. A few trips together that were enjoyable: Yellowstone, British Columbia, the Grand Canyon, and once back to Columbus to watch the Buckeyes crush Purdue for Homecoming. Add scattered moments of shared joy or sorrow: his winning the job with the West Valley Police Department, and the move to California, promotion to Sergeant, the death of Mavis's father.

How few the memories were. How little they all meant now. Like photos in an album of people you barely remembered.

He was in a remembering mood, but thinking about his marriage only depressed him. Kettering sank deeper into the recliner and put his thoughts on rewind, all the way back to Prescott, Indiana, and the childhood that shaped the man he was ...

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After the death of the Reverend Kettering, Brian's mother had showed unsuspected strength as she gathered her children about her and went to work rebuilding their lives. The house was paid for, so they continued to live in it, though Brian never again felt really comfortable there.

His mother used the reverend's life-insurance money to open a card and book shop in the small downtown business section. Brian and Jessie helped out in the shop after school, and it soon began to show a profit. There was never any extra money in the Kettering family, but none of them went hungry.

The children discovered that they were treated differently after the death of their father. Although officially it was called natural causes, an aura of something strange clung to the tragedy. Brian's vagueness about what he had seen was viewed with some suspicion by his friends.

He no longer talked to anybody about the day of the picnic. He tried not to think about it, but sometimes in the dark of night he would stare up at the ceiling and the unwanted thoughts would come into his head. His father's voice. The angry, ugly words. The other, not-quite-human voice. The blurry scene through his front

window that made no sense. And, oddly, the pizza wagon parked where it had no business being.

At first he had tried talking to people about the little he did remember. His mother was too distracted to listen. Jessie had never paid attention to her little brother and was not about to start now. His friends thought it was all a game, something he was making up. He was known as an imaginative boy. Before long Brian could see it wasn't doing him any good to talk about it. He saw the knowing glances that bounced back and forth when he entered a room. *It's the Kettering kid. He's been a little weird ever since his father died.* Still, reality, imagination, weirdness, whatever it was, the day of the picnic continued to haunt his dreams.

As for Jessica, she seemed even more tainted by the sudden, unexplained death of her father than was Brian. Girls who had been her close friends offered the expected sympathy right after it happened, then dropped her like a hot rock.

The whole family felt the stigma. Irrational though it was, people treated them as though the Reverend Harlan Kettering had died during the commission of some heinous crime. Everybody was polite enough to the family, but kept them at a distance. Because it was he who had seen the death, even though hazily, and reported it, Brian felt that he was responsible.

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Kettering started forward, cranking the recliner to the upright position. He saw that the muted Suzanne Somers and her breasts were gone from the screen, replaced by a lovable, blow-dried family who mouthed silent wisecracks at each other. He thumbed the television screen to darkness and wandered out to the kitchen to see what was available to eat.

Chapter 7

Except for the liquor cupboard and the tool drawer, the kitchen was unfamiliar territory to Kettering. It was Mavis's domain. It was she who decided where things ought to go, and she saw to it that they stayed where they belonged. This arrangement got no opposition from Kettering, who had never been comfortable around kitchen utensils and uncooked groceries.

Now he was hungry, and no one was there to provide him with something to eat. He rummaged around on the shelves until he found a can of vegetable soup.

"I ought to be able to manage this," he muttered to the empty house.

It took another five minutes to locate a can opener. He handled that task without cutting himself, poured the contents into a pot, and added a can of water as instructed on the soup-can label. He set it on the gas range and turned up the burner.

"Nothing so tough about cooking," he said, then went out and forgot about it until he smelled scorched aluminum.

"Shit!" he said, burning his hand on the pot as he hustled the smoking mess from the stove to the sink. He ran the cold water and let the pot sit there with the gummy mess soaking in the bottom. What the hell, he decided, he wasn't all that hungry anyway.

Kettering turned away from the sink and walked to the liquor cupboard. There were times, he reflected, when even a dedicated nonabuser of alcohol had to adjust to extraordinary circumstances. He poured himself a generous shot of bourbon, dropped in ice cubes, and wandered off through his house with the drink in his hand.

He should be feeling more deeply the imminent breakup of his marriage, Kettering thought, and the dissolution of his home. There should be pain. Guilt. Regret. But he felt strangely numb.

He wandered around touching the furniture, trying to remember when the different pieces were bought, trying to feel some emotion about them. No good. All he felt was that he did not like most of the stuff to begin with, and only agreed to buy it because Mavis wanted it. Aside from his taped-up old reclining chair, there was not a stick here that he felt was really his. Nothing he would miss if he never saw it again.

He carried the drink to the back of the house and into their bedroom. The bed was neatly made, as always, and cold looking. On Mavis's dressing table everything was arranged with geometric precision. In contrast, the top of the bureau that held his clothes was littered with the jetsam of a man's pockets. Coins, matchbooks, receipts, paper clips, business cards, crumpled scraps of paper. Mavis had long ago given up on keeping that area uncluttered.

He walked back out and down the short hallway to Trevor's room. It was here that a sense of loss and loneliness finally hit him.

His son's room was not at all like Brian's when he was a boy. There, in the upstairs bedroom of the solid brick house, he had had model airplanes, pictures of baseball players - mostly Chicago Cubs - sports equipment, comic books, assorted toys and games. Trevor's room reflected another generation. There was the elaborate stereo system, of course, with the newly added compact-disk player. Records, tapes, and CDs lay everywhere. They were recorded by groups with names like Twisted Sister, Maniac, The Grateful Dead, X. Wild, pounding music that disgusted the father but must have said something to the son.

When he was a boy, Kettering had never been much interested in music. Had his father lived, he probably would have encouraged his children to listen to Pat Boone. And like the rest of the nation's youth, young Brian would probably have opted for Elvis.

The sounds he liked to listen to now were the big swing bands, led by men now dead. When Brian was born at the end of World War II,

the big bands were already on their way out. The singers and small combos were crowding them off the record racks, shortly to be followed by early rock 'n' roll.

Although he was not personally around for the heyday of Benny Goodman, Harry James, the Dorsey brothers, and the rest, Kettering felt a kinship with their music. Straight, clean chords. Uncomplicated rhythms. Harmonic but exciting.

Kettering sighed and looked around his son's room. Clothing was draped here and there without organization, but not really messy. There was a framed poster of a red-lacquered Corvette, another of a teenage television star looking determinedly sexy. There was a rubber monster mask from last halloween. A Day-Glo orange skateboard. A video game that had never worked properly. A Sony Walkman.

Almost nothing here that Brian Kettering could relate to. And yet he felt there was something of himself in this room. Something of him in his son that neither the man nor the boy had been able to bring out. If they ever did, he wondered if they would recognize it. Or admit it.

Trevor's closet contained far more clothes than his father's had ever had. Peer pressure, even on boys, seemed to dictate an entirely new wardrobe every year. If your jeans or your running shoes were last season's brand, your social life was in the toilet.

There were a few books. John D. MacDonald, Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King. There might still be hope for the kid. At least he could read.

So Trevor wasn't the perfect son. Kettering sure as hell was no Ward Cleaver as a father. He hadn't wanted the kid in the first place, and during the infant years, he had stayed away from home on the slightest excuse and let Mavis do the dirty work. Small wonder that when he did start to take an honest interest in his son, the boy wanted no part of him. Was there still time, he wondered, or was it already too late?

He considered for a moment giving the room a thorough

shakedown. He knew all the hiding places where a kid would stash his dope paraphernalia. No, he decided, Mavis was right about that. You had to stop being a cop somewhere.

Kettering left the boy's room and carefully closed the door. He returned to the kitchen and refilled the glass, which had somehow been drained on his stroll through the house.

The emptiness of the place closed around him like a fog bank. He went back to the patched old recliner. The chair received him like a longtime friend.

Kettering settled back, sipped the bourbon, and closed his eyes. Was it possible to think of nothing? Make your mind a void? He tried it. Think blackness. Think silence. Think ...

The blast of cold hit him in the face like the icy wind of an Indiana winter. Kettering sat up fast, his eyes snapping open. The cubes rattled against the glass in his hand. What the hell?!

His left leg began to quiver. He looked down at it and it began to shake, the foot bouncing up and down in a crazy hopping dance. It was like the thing didn't even belong to him. Kettering dropped the whiskey glass and grasped his thigh with both hands. He strained, his fingers sinking into the quadriceps muscle, but he could not keep the limb still. A hoarse voice shouted, echoing through the empty house. It took him a moment to recognize it as his own.

Abruptly as the jerking had started, it stopped. The leg rested inert, quiet. Gradually, cautiously, he relaxed the grip of his fingers. He could feel the bruises they left on the thigh.

What the fuck is happening to me? Damn good thing Doc Protius hadn't seen that, he thought. He'd have me on medical leave before I could hiccup.

He was sweating? *Sweating?* A minute ago it felt like an arctic blast was blowing through his house. Kettering looked down at the spilled glass of bourbon. Booze had never hit him like that. Anyway, he had barely tasted it. A dream? Something like that. It had to be. Stress. Good old stress, this season's answer for what's

wrong with you if you don't have a clue.

He sat back and took half a dozen long, slow, deep breaths. Okay, he was in control again. Nothing to worry about. Nothing really happened.

Except that his right thigh ached like hell, and he knew that when he dropped his pants tonight there would be blue-black bruises where he had gripped it.

Chapter 8

Kettering picked up the fallen glass. He rubbed the gooseflesh down on his arm. The temperature in the room was back to normal. Had it really chilled, or was it his overwrought imagination? Like hell! It had got inexplicably cold in here and his leg had started to jump. The causes he could worry about later; it was enough now to know it really happened.

He carried the empty glass over to the mantle. There he set it down next to the family picture taken when Trevor was six years old and the three of them had driven to Yosemite on his vacation. That would have been what, ten years ago? Eleven? Were they really a family then? Kettering studied the smiling faces in the photograph and tried to remember.

Mavis wore her hair longer then. She had on shorts and a loose cotton top. She smiled big into the camera. Trevor, uncomfortable in a stiff new pair of jeans, looked as though he badly wanted to be doing something else. Kettering himself wore an unconvincing grin as he squinted into the sun.

He could not remember who took the photograph. One of the park rangers, he thought. Kettering sent his mind back through time to recapture the emotions of ten or eleven years ago when he stood with his wife and son posing for the thirty-five-millimeter camera. With some surprise, he realized that his feelings when that long-ago shutter snapped were not all that different from what he felt today. Despite the affectionate hand on Mavis's waist, he had been thinking just then about a persistent pain in his back and how it would affect his upcoming annual physical. The pain turned out to be a small kidney stone that later flushed out naturally, but worrying about it had put a chill on the entire vacation.

Mavis had wanted to go that year to Hawaii or Acapulco or

somewhere exotic where they had resort hotels and swimming pools and fruity rum drinks with little parasols in them. Kettering had explained the hard financial reasons for choosing Yosemite, but she had never warmed up to the idea. As for Trevor, all he cared about was how soon they would get back home so he could return to his TV cartoons.

Kettering replaced the eleven-year-old photograph and took a critical look at the face in the mirror, matching it to his younger self. He was a little heavier in the jowl, the hair had a peppering of gray, but was still thick. In the eyes he saw a wisdom and a sadness that had not been there before. He looked down beside his reflection to the glass with the droplets of Wild Turkey clinging to the sides.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked himself. "Here you sit drinking alone, getting cold flashes and the shivers, wondering where everything went, while your marriage crashes around your ears."

For almost nineteen years he had been a married man. Not what you'd call nineteen years of bliss, but that many years of anything shouldn't be tossed away like an empty beer can.

Impulsively, Kettering carried the whiskey glass into the kitchen and set it in She sink. He spooned coffee into the Mr. Coffee filter, added water to the machine, and went to take a shower while it brewed.

While he soaped his body in the shower, the memory of Charity Moline slipped in with him. Damned if he wasn't getting a hard-on thinking about her. He had a crazy impulse to walk out stark naked and dripping wet and call her. He swallowed the urge and forced his mind back to his resolve to do something about his collapsing marriage. His hard-on wilted.

Kettering dressed in a soft shirt, slacks, and the gray suede Hush Puppies he hardly ever wore. They felt good on his feet, but if he had to kick in a door or mash somebody's shinbone, they couldn't match good reinforced leather. Back in the kitchen he poured a cup of fresh coffee and sat down to work out what he would say to

Mavis when she came home.

Can we sit down and talk about ... us?

Good God, no, that sounded like something out of a crummy soap opera.

Mavis, I've been thinking. You and I haven't exactly been hitting it off lately.

Now there was a news flash for you. And what did he mean *lately!*

Honey, I love ya. Let's go to bed.

And what if she said no thanks? Or what if she said fine and nothing happened for him? Or what if ...

Wait a minute? What if there was another man? He considered the possibility for a moment, then discarded it. Not Mavis. He would have bet his gun and his badge that she had never been unfaithful to him. He discarded the notion.

To hell with this, he decided. If he sat around here waiting for her to come home and imagining scenarios, he'd rehearse himself right into incoherence. It was time to use some male initiative and go get her.

He found Mavis's address book in the drawer of the nightstand on her side of the bed. He had a pang of guilty Peeping Tom feeling as he thumbed through it looking for Gabrielle Wister's name. His job as a policeman had required him to search through the most intimate belongings of complete strangers, discovering secrets, spying on lives. When you thought about it, there was something warped about that. Like sniffing other people's underwear. But it was his job.

Still, in all the years of his marriage, he had never looked through Mavis's purse. Never read her mail, never eavesdropped on her telephone conversations. Now he was thinking maybe he should have.

Gabrielle Wister, he discovered, lived on Ladonna Place. That was

one of the keyhole cul-de-sacs west of Reseda, north of the local branch of Valley State College. It was a nice, quiet residential neighborhood. Kettering memorized the address, replaced the book in the drawer as he had found it, and left the house.

The car was cold. He turned on the heater, a device you rarely used in Southern California. The night was without stars, and it seemed to grow blacker as Kettering drove. The headlights had trouble piercing the darkness, and he drove slowly, straining to see the street signs.

He located Ladonna Place and turned into the short block. All the houses along both sides were dark. No cars were parked along the curb. Had he memorized the wrong address? A mistake like that would be most unlike him, but was it possible an art class was being taught in one of these dark, quiet little houses?

He drove slowly up the street and stopped when he saw Mavis's Honda in the driveway of one of the houses at the keyhole end of the cul-de-sac. That didn't compute. Where were the cars of her classmates? Had Mavis stayed after the class was over? Reluctant to come home, maybe. Kettering knew that feeling. He parked the Camaro and sat for a minute studying the house. Heavy curtains covered the windows in front, but a smudge of light showed dimly around the edges. He got out of the car and walked up to the front door.

Through the narrow center gap in the curtains he could see the pale light from somewhere inside. It was not coming from the living room.

A faint alarm sounded in Kettering's head. Something wrong here? Almost twenty years as a policeman had given him a sense of the abnormal, and something definitely was off center.

He thumbed the door bell, clearly heard the *bing-bong* of the chimes inside. He waited, the hair prickling as a cold breeze touched the back of his neck.

Again: *bing-bong.*

Instinctively, Kettering checked to be sure the button of his jacket was not obstructing the hip holster. Not that he expected to have to draw his gun, but when there was no response from behind a door where you knew there were people, you just naturally got set.

He balled his hand into a fist and pounded on the panel, swallowing an impulse to call out, *Open up! Police!* From inside came a rustle of movement. The door opened three inches. The strip of face he saw was pale and clear in complexion. Delicate mouth. High cheekbones, narrow nose. The eye that peered out at him was dark, with long, moist lashes. Through the open crack he could see that the owner of the eye was wearing a maroon velour robe.

The chill hit him again and Kettering shuddered. His left eyelid began to twitch.

"Yes?" The voice was deep and resonant, but distinctly feminine.

"I'm Brian Kettering."

The eye stared at him, unblinking.

"Mavis Kettering's husband. Is my wife here?"

"What is it, Gaby?" Mavis's voice from somewhere inside.

The eye turned from the doorway. Kettering got a look at dark, close-cropped hair, shaved at the neck.

"Oh!"

Mavis's voice again, with surprise and shock packed into the one syllable.

Kettering put the flat of his hand on the door and gently pushed it all the way open. The woman behind it backed away and did not resist.

Mavis stood in an open doorway that led to the room where the pale light was coming from. Behind her was a double bed with the satin spread thrown back and the powder-blue sheets rumpled. Mavis made a gesture to cover herself as Kettering stepped into the

living room, then slowly lowered her hands and faced him.

For what seemed like many seconds the three of them stood there. It was the classic discovery situation. Almost.

The lean, dark woman stood beside the door, eyeing Kettering cautiously. Ready to jump either way. Mavis, wearing only brief panties, her small breasts defiantly upthrust, was framed by the bedroom door. Kettering felt large and clumsy, the cuckolded husband. Or was that the proper term for this situation?

He had to clear his throat before he could speak.

"Is this ... what it looks like?"

One corner of Gabrielle Wister's mouth lifted in a phantom smile. She turned to Mavis. Kettering's wife nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his.

When she spoke her voice was calm. Calmer than he had heard it in a long time. "That's the way it is, Brian."

There was not, Kettering thought, a hell of a lot a man could do in this situation. If he had caught her in bed with another man, he could have punched the guy's lights out and raised some vocal hell with his wife. But another woman? Kettering had been a cop long enough to have come in contact with deviations from the norm that were beyond most people's imaginings. But Mavis? And another woman? And a little while ago he had been assuring himself there was no chance she was seeing another man. He could still be right about that.

He realized that he was standing there awkward and silent, holding his breath for much too long. Trying to stay calm, he exhaled, nodded once at Mavis, turned away from the scene and walked out.

The night was blacker than ever as he drove home. He met no other traffic. Kettering kept his speed down, fighting the animal rage that wanted to stomp the Camaro's accelerator to the floor and torture the tires as he slid around corners. His mind buzzed without accomplishing anything, like a jammed garbage disposal. Painful

images of Mavis and the other woman flicked in and out of his consciousness. He did not even want to think about what they did to each other on those powder-blue sheets. And yet he wanted to know. Perversely, the flickering images excited and disgusted him at the same time.

When his mind finally began to unclog, Kettering saw he had almost driven past his own street. He hit the brakes and made the turn. The neighborhood seemed foreign to him now. His house was like the house of a stranger. Nothing looked quite the same. And it was so very dark.

As he slowed to turn into the drive, he saw a movement between the decorative junipers that framed his driveway.

Kettering's mind instantly voided itself of all extraneous images, and the cop's instincts took over. He drove on slowly past the house.

He traveled half a block to a point that was shielded from his front door by a neighbor's bougainvillea. There he parked, eased out of the car, and walked silently back toward his house. He held the S&W Centennial in his right hand, the muzzle pointed straight up, according to regulations.

Someone, or something, was at his door. For a brief moment Kettering had feared it was a hallucination brought on by the traumatic scene he had witnessed between his wife and Gabrielle Wister. But no. He had seen it, all right.

It appeared to be a man. A tall man, bent over, intent on what he was doing. Trying to break in? Not likely. With windows all around and the sliding glass doors on the patio in back, no burglar would try to get in the front. Whatever he was doing, the man made no sound. The hunched shoulders moved in small, jerky spasms. A twinge of familiarity tugged at Kettering's consciousness.

"Freeze!" he yelled, as dictated by proper police procedure.

The figure at his door rose slowly and turned to face him. In the dim light from the streetlamp at the corner, Kettering could make out no features, but the shape was chillingly familiar - the tall body,

the elongated, misshapen head, long, dangling arms, heavy legs. One of the arms came up. Clutched in the talons was something metallic.

"Freeze!" Kettering shouted again. "Drop it." But his voice had lost its authoritarian bellow. It was the piping cry of a small boy.

In the gloom he thought he could make out a smile on the face of the figure at his door. The long arm extended toward him. Metal glinted dully in the diffused light.

When there is an unmistakable threat to your life, you shoot. It might be hard convincing the police board of inquiry and the civilian review board and the city attorney and, especially, the media that you really *were* in danger, but you could worry about all that later. When you were about to die, you used your piece.

Kettering leveled the revolver and fired. Again. Again. Again.

Kettering was a good shot. He always scored high on the police range. There was no way he could have missed four times at that distance. Yet the figure that loomed in his doorway did not fall.

The 160-grain hollow-point bullets, duly authorized by the police commission over the objections of the ACLU, should have stopped the intruder in his tracks, knocked him back against the door and off his feet.

Then, finally, as Kettering watched with the smoking gun in his hand, the figure sank slowly, almost daintily, facedown on the flagstones in front of the stoop. Kettering raced forward, pistol held high and ready. He knelt beside the victim.

A sour vomit rose in his throat and Kettering had to swallow hard to keep it back. It was not a man who lay there in front of his door. It was smaller. Much smaller than it had looked from the street. More like a woman ... or a little boy.

His hand shaking, Kettering grasped one thin shoulder and turned him over. He groaned aloud as he looked into the face of a child. A dark-eyed, pale-haired boy of about six. Beside his outstretched

hand was a spray-paint can. The boy's eyes looked up into his with a terrible familiarity. He opened his mouth as though to speak, but all that came out was a bright red bubble of blood.

"Oh, Jesus God, no!" The strange voice was his own.

Kettering raised his eyes to the door. There, in fresh crimson, was the tall mocking figure that had dogged him since that long-ago summer day in Indiana.

Doomstalker.

Kettering's howl into the night sky blended with the oncoming bray of a siren. The darkness thickened and closed in around him.

Chapter 9

From the darkness came a rumbling growl.

A smell of leather and motor oil.

Male voices.

Motorcycles.

Brian Kettering, age twelve, lay wide awake, fully dressed on the narrow bed in his room. He was listening, listening for the sound of motorcycles, and thinking about the Greasers.

***

When the Greasers came to town, the sensation of Harlan Kettering's death had long since faded, but not without leaving its marks on his children.

Each of them had reacted differently to the new situation. Jessica, who had been a quiet, courteous child, became loud and unruly in school, and careless about her personal habits. At home she turned sullen, distancing herself from her mother and brother. Her grades, which had always been excellent, dropped precipitously.

Brian, on the other hand, turned inward. A friendly, outgoing boy before the tragedy, he became quiet and withdrawn. At school he spoke only when asked a direct question. At home he retired to his room after dinner to read and work out with the weights that had been one of his father's last gifts. Lucille was concerned about the change in her children, but the pressure of maintaining a home and running the bookshop she had opened after the reverend's death kept her from spending much time with them.

The months passed. A new young minister took over the Reverend

Kettering's church. The congregation, willing enough to forget the curious death of their former minister, accepted him eagerly.

Lucille Kettering continued to attend Sunday services, but alone. Jessica always found some excuse for not going - her head ached, she had to study, she was catching a cold, her period had started.

Brian offered no excuses, but stubbornly refused to go to church or Sunday school. As far as he was concerned, the church had failed them all. His father had died needlessly, and now the family was unfairly shunned by their neighbors. If this was God's way, Brian wanted no part of it.

Their mother was saddened by the turning away of her children from their faith, but she was powerless to change their minds.

Jessie was in her first year of high school when the Greasers came. They were as foreign to Prescott, Indiana, as a gang of Chinese bandits. They wore leather jackets, sideburns, greasy hair. They rode big muscular motorcycles with rumble-throated mufflers. They drank beer and cheap wine straight from the bottles. There had always been the "other side of the tracks" people in Prescott, but these newcomers were different, dangerous.

No one seemed to know exactly when the Greasers arrived or where they came from. At first they were treated as a minor irritation - a transient band of bikers to be ignored until they went away. Then it became apparent they were in no hurry to leave, and the people of the town began to worry.

The Greasers seemingly had no adult supervision. They came and went as they pleased. They lived in a grubby camp on the edge of town that consisted of tents, lean-tos, and shacks made of scrap lumber and bits of metal. When the wind was from the south, you could smell them all over Prescott.

They drove the citizens from their park and then took it over, filling it with empty bottles, and tension. They struck Marlon Brando poses and harassed innocent passersby. They challenged the town boys, made lewd suggestions to girls.

The tiny police department of Prescott was ineffectual in dealing with the newcomers. No serious laws were being broken, and nobody really wanted a confrontation. Better to be patient and wait for them to tire of the town and leave.

The Greasers seemed to live in their own insulated bubble. They had no visible families, no jobs, no morals, and no restraints. They were unshaven and unclean. They talked ugly and they smelled bad. The good people of Prescott prayed silently for them to vanish.

While the adults fretted, many of the Prescott teenagers watched the Greasers from a distance with secret admiration and more than a touch of envy. They had the insidious attraction of evil.

For the most part the local kids stayed well away from the park and from the patch of ground where the Greasers had set up their camp. Those who fraternized faced big trouble from their parents.

Brian Kettering had no admiration for the strangers. In fact, he hated them with an unreasoning passion too fierce for his twelve years. He was never able to articulate the depth of his emotion, but the loathing was plain in his young face whenever one of the Greasers passed on the street. He never flinched from their glare, and they looked long and deep at the boy as though they shared some dirty secret.

What made Brian's revulsion for the Greasers even more acute was the fact that his sister was madly attracted to them. Secretly at first, then more openly, Jessie spent her time hanging around with the loud, undisciplined youths.

Lucille Kettering lectured her daughter on the dangers of associating with such undesirables, but without the threat of paternal discipline, her arguments had no effect. Brian added his own voice to the opposition.

"Why do you hang out with those pukes, anyway?" he asked her.

"None of your business."

"Like heck it isn't. You're my sister, and you're too good to mess

around with that crud."

"And when did you start taking such an interest in what I do?"

"Since now. Those assholes are bad news. You ought to stay away from them."

"Where did you learn words like that?"

"Never mind. I know what I'm talking about."

Jessie faced him, hands on hips. "You're a twelve-year-old kid. You don't know shit. Where do you get off telling me what I should and shouldn't do?"

"I know, that's all. If you mess around with them you're ... well, you're gonna be sorry."

***

He lay in his bed and stared up into the darkness, listening. Listening for a motorcycle. Listening for Jessie in the next room. Listening ...

"What the hell?!"

Brian Kettering, age forty-three, sat up and stared out the back door of the police ambulance. The bar atop a WVPD black-and-white flashed red, blue, red, blue.

A white-jacketed medic rubbed his head where it had banged off the ceiling of the ambulance van. "Jesus, Sergeant, you gave me a start."

"What am I doing in here?"

"You were unconscious."

Kettering swung his legs out of the pallet where he lay and was surprised for a moment to see the gray Hush Puppies on his feet. Then he remembered. And he groaned.

"I've got to get out of here."

The medic reached for him, but not seriously. "I'm supposed to take you in for observation."

"Forget it."

Kettering jumped out of the back of the van and headed for the police car.

Chapter 10

The afternoon was colorless, with darkness creeping in around the edges. A heavy overcast had kept the sun back all day. Fluorescent ceiling tubes threw stark white light on the two men who sat in the room below and the third who entered as they watched. It gave their faces an unhealthy blue-white cast, but did little to dispel the gloom.

"Feeling any better, Brian?" said Lieutenant Ivory.

"No."

"You should have let them check you over last night."

"It wouldn't have done any good."

"You had something to eat, I hope."

"I didn't have time. I've been apartment hunting."

Kettering took a seat next to Protius, across the desk from Lieutenant Ivory.

"There really isn't a whole lot of point in continuing this," Ivory said. "We covered the whole incident last night and again this morning. We could close the books now, Brian, except for your stubborn insistence that - "

"It was a kid," Kettering finished for him, making an effort to keep his voice steady. He lapsed into a rote recitation, repeating words he had spoken many times today. "A kid six, maybe seven years old. But when he first stood up out of a crouch there at the front door, he looked like a full-grown man. A big man. He reached out and pointed something at me. Metal. A gun, I thought. And I shot him."

Lieutenant Ivory and Dr. Protius looked quickly at each other, then back at Kettering.

"There wasn't any kid, Brian," Ivory said. "We told you that."

"I shot a kid," Kettering insisted. "Four times. I don't miss at that range. I didn't miss last night. But I swear, all the time I was shooting I thought it was a man. After he went down I ran up to the door. I saw then it wasn't a man. I turned him over, faceup, and he looked at me. This little kid looked at me. He opened his mouth and blood came out. He died with me standing there looking at him."

"There wasn't any kid," Ivory said yet again. "No kid, no gun, no blood."

"I know now he didn't have a gun," Kettering said. "It was a spray-paint can. A fucking spray-paint can. I thought it was a gun."

"There wasn't any spray can either," Ivory said.

"I shot him four times."

"You fired your piece four times. That much we verified. There are four bullet holes in your door. Your neighbor saw the whole thing and called us. He said you were standing outside on the sidewalk, yelling and shooting at your own house."

Kettering wiped a hand over his chin. The twenty-four-hour beard rasped against his palm.

"It was all ... so real. When I turned the kid over, it was like I knew him. He looked like ... he looked like ..."

"Who, Brian?" Dr. Protius said softly.

"He looked like me."

Lieutenant Ivory cleared his throat and got businesslike. "You know I've got to take you off the street while this is under investigation. Standard procedure. Whether we have a victim or not, it's still an officer-involved shooting."

"I know," Kettering said.

"And you know the options. I can either put you on the desk for a few days or you can take some of the time you've got coming."

"I'll take the time," Kettering said. "I've got to move today."

The other men exchanged a look.

"If there's anything I can do ..." Protius said.

"Thanks. I don't think so." When neither of the others spoke, Kettering stood up. "If that's it, then ..."

Ivory rose quickly and came around the desk. "This shouldn't take more than two, three days. Check in with me, will you?"

"Sure."

Kettering pushed himself up out of the chair. Dr. Protius stood up quickly beside him.

"Got any lunch plans, Brian? I missed mine, and I hate to eat alone."

"Thanks, Doc, but I'm not hungry."

"I thought we might talk."

"Not now, okay?"

Protius nodded. "You know where to find me."

"I know."

Kettering started out the door, then turned back. Lieutenant Ivory and the doctor were watching him.

He took a couple of steps back toward them and said, "Lieutenant, when they checked out my front door, where the bullet holes were, was something painted there?"

"Yeah. Some kind of a picture. Crude, like a kid did it."

"Thank God something I saw was real." To Protius he said, "It's the same one I told you about. The one I scrubbed off."

"Well, you didn't get it all," Ivory said. "Probably, that was what you saw from the street and mistook for someone standing in front of your door. A trick of the light made it seem three-dimensional."

"Yeah, probably," Kettering said without conviction.

The lieutenant spoke up. "If it makes you feel any better, you drilled it four times in the upper abdomen. You could cover the pattern with a jack of diamonds."

Kettering's smile was cold. He said, "At least I can still shoot."

***

Al Diaz was out in the parking lot, pretending to search for something in the back of his Toyota van, when Kettering walked out. He looked up with poorly feigned surprise as his partner approached.

"Oh, hi, buddy. I heard you were in the hot box with Ivory and the Doc."

"You heard right."

"So? How'd it go?"

Kettering shrugged. "They tell me I was shooting at shadows. But definitely shooting. They gave me the usual choice - desk or days off."

"You took the days, right?"

"Right."

"I don't blame you. Uh, Brian ..."

"Yeah?"

"Sorry to hear about you and Mavis."

"Jesus, does everybody know?"

"Word gets around."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's something that's been building."

"How's your boy taking it?"

"Trevor? He's eighteen, he can make his own decisions. I suppose he'll stay with Mavis. Or maybe he'll find a place of his own. He's got a job now. So I hear."

"That's good."

Kettering sagged back against the side of the van. "Hell, I don't know how if it's good or not. I don't even know what he does, Al. We don't talk."

"I guess that's the way with teenage kids and fathers."

"I guess."

"At least he's got a job. Where is it?"

"Some club where the kids go. Called The Pit. Ever hear of it?"

Diaz's mouth tightened. "Isn't that Enzo DuLac's place?"

"Who?"

Diaz repeated the name. "He's a small-time Hollywood street hustler. Found himself a backer somewhere and opened up a club on Van Nuys. Want me to check it out for you?"

"Nah. Well, if you get a chance."

Diaz made a note in his pad. "So what are you going to do?"

"Learn how to live alone."

"Got a place to stay?"

"I found an apartment this morning. It's not much, but I don't need

much."

"Give me the address."

He took Diaz's notebook from him and scribbled the number and street. "I don't know how long I'll be here, but for a while it's home."

"Listen, you're always welcome at my place. Michi would love to have you for dinner any time."

"Thanks, Al."

"In fact, how about tonight?"

"I'll take a rain check."

Diaz cocked his head and looked at him narrowly. "And Brian, if there's anything else I can help you with ... anything ... you got it."

Kettering grasped his partner's hand. "That's good to know, buddy. I'll be in touch."

As he drove out of the police parking lot, Kettering waved to his partner with a jauntiness he did not feel.

***

When he parked out in front of his house and headed up the walk, Kettering caught himself once again deliberately looking away from the front door.

"All right, enough of this shit," he told himself.

He stopped and faced the door. There in dark, evil bloodred, stretching from the top of the door to the sill, was the hump-shouldered, talon-fingered thing that was by now too familiar. It was just sloppy enough for it to maybe be a random splash of paint. To somebody else, maybe. To Brian Kettering, it was Doomstalker.

Kettering drew his fingertips across the red smear. They came away dry, but he wiped them on his pants anyway, grimacing as though they had been slimed.

The hell with this, he decided, and went on into the house. He looked around at what had been his home for the past eight years. He remembered, on the day they moved in, Mavis's pleasure at the large kitchen, the flower beds, the proximity of the school. To him it was just another house. A place to live. Kettering did not get sentimental about places. He would take a few memories away from here with him - some good, some bad. Most of them were just a shade of gray.

The one thing here he would really miss was his beat-up old reclining chair. He walked over and stroked the wrinkled and patched headrest like the neck of a faithful steed. Maybe he would have it trucked over to the new place. Mavis certainly would not object to that. She'd been nagging him to get rid of it for years.

Nothing else in the house made any difference to him. She could have all of it.

He filled his big soft-sided suitcase with clothes, and a smaller bag with his bathroom gear, and carried them out to the car. He went back into the house, found a cardboard carton and filled it with things he might need in the coming days. A few books, a small radio, some personal papers, a box of ammunition for the S&W Centennial, what was left of the Wild Turkey.

He balanced the full carton on one arm and pulled open the front door with his free hand. A surprised Trevor stood outside, reaching for the doorknob. The boy snatched his hand back. He looked around as though he'd like to wheel around and run the other way.

"Hi."

"Hi, Dad."

Father and son stood facing each other for an awkward moment. The boy spoke first.

"So. You're moving out, huh?"

"Looks that way. Did your mother tell you about it?"

"She mentioned it. How long you going for?"

"Hard to say."

"Yeah, well, that's the way it goes. You leaving now?"

"Unless you want to talk."

"What's to talk about?"

Kettering groped for something to say. "I hear you've got a job."

"Yeah. Part time. For the summer."

"Doing what?"

"Just, you know, helping out down at this club. Helping the D.J. on weeknights. Getting the band set up on weekends. Like that."

"Yeah. Well, that's good."

"It's okay."

"I guess I'll see you."

"Yeah, right. So long." Trevor eased past him and disappeared into the house.

Kettering looked after the boy, still holding the carton of his belongings. What did you expect, he asked himself, a big father-son reunion? Fat chance.

He walked on out to the Camaro and shoved the carton onto the passenger's seat.

***

Trevor Kettering had just reached the door to his room when he heard the front door slam. He stopped and turned back, feeling unaccountably choked up.

What the fuck, it wasn't like he and his old man were pals or anything. How could anybody be pals with a cop, anyway? Just his rotten luck to have a cop for an old man.

He flopped on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Time to sort things out. So his mom and dad were splitting up. No big shocker there. They hadn't been getting along for a long time, if they ever did. He'd be outta here himself soon, so it really wouldn't mean fuck-all.

And yet ... there was a tight feeling in his throat. Maybe they weren't as cool as Bill Cosby and the chick who played the mother on his show, but they *were* his folks. They had kept an okay home for him here and treated him reasonably well and not bugged him too much, even though they didn't really understand what he was all about. They could be a royal pain in the ass sometimes, but they *were* his folks.

Trevor sat up abruptly, startled and embarrassed by the moisture in his eyes. What the fuck was this? Was he going to cry now or some damn thing like that? Bull *shit*!

He got up and popped a cassette into the $300 Fisher tape deck, turned the volume up, and let the ferocious sounds of Ozzy Osburne slam into him.

Yeah, all right!

The old man would shit if he came in and heard Ozzy at this volume shaking the old house down to the floorboards. If the old man had his way, Trevor would listen to nothing but Barry Manilow and Linda Ronstadt. Or maybe those moldy old prehistoric bands that he thought were so cool.

But the old man wasn't coming in anymore, he reminded himself. The old man and his mother had split.

Trevor turned the volume down to a listenable level. No point busting his ears if there was nobody around to get pissed off. He lay back down and thought about what his life would be from here on.

Mom wanted him to go to college, but fuck that. With his grades, he'd have to go to one of those jackoff junior colleges full of beaners and Buddhaheads and old farts going back to school for some dumbass reason. No way, not for Trevor Kettering. He had better

things going for him.

The job at The Pit was a lucky break. He didn't have to do much, just sort the records and tapes for Chazz the D.J., and help set up for the bands on weekends. What it was, he was basically getting paid to hang out, which he'd be doing anyway for nothing.

But more important than the job, more important than college or his folks splitting up or any damn thing else, was Zoara Sol.

Trevor felt the stirring of his cock just from thinking about her. He reached down and rubbed himself.

He just met her that one time at The Pit, but holy jumping shit, the things she did to him inside. He closed his eyes and saw her - smoky-yellow hair, crazy silver eyes, a voice that came at you through a layer of velvet. All she would have to do would be crook her finger and Trevor Kettering would sit up and bark, if that's what she wanted.

The most important thing in his life right now was to see her again. And he knew he would. The silver eyes told him so.

He held his rigid cock through the smooth cotton jeans. From outside came the faint sound of his father's car driving away.

Trevor barely heard.

Chapter 11

Before he drove off, Kettering stood beside the Camaro and took a last look at the modest California ranch house that had been his home. There should be some kind of emotion involved, he thought. Loss, regret, nostalgia. Relief, even. But he felt nothing. No, that was not true. He felt a deep, grinding anger. Not at his wife, not at their failure to make a marriage, not at the wasted years. His anger was focused on the mocking red figure that defaced his front door, and whatever agency was responsible for putting it there. Doomstalker.

One day, Kettering sensed, he and his spectral enemy would stand face to face. And, as they used to say in Western movies, only one would walk away.

"Come and get me, you sonofabitch," he muttered.

He climbed into the car, slammed the door, and drove off without looking back again.

***

The building into which Kettering moved his sparse belongings was the last of its generation on a street of new, cheap apartments that had mushroomed during the building boom of the 1960s. It was a three-story wooden-frame structure, painted an unhealthy yellow, which dated back to a time before the freeway sliced through the Valley. When the building went up, the area was still dominated by orange groves and bean fields. As the Valley shifted emphasis and mutated to a cluster of suburbs with clots of light industry, the building somehow escaped the general razing of old structures and stood like a relic of another time among the stucco and plaster boxes that were its neighbors.

A rickety flight of wooden stairs zigged up to the second-floor landing and zagged to the third. Kettering had picked up the local throwaway paper this morning and started at the bottom of the for-rent column, where the cheapest rentals were listed. This was the only place he looked at, and he surprised the owner by taking it with barely a glance.

He was surprised to see the silver-gray Mazda parked on the street as he pulled up. He parked his own car on the other side and walked back toward the Mazda. Charity Moline looked up at him through the rolled-down window as he approached.

"You didn't call me," she said.

"Was I supposed to?"

"I was hoping."

She smelled fresh and good as she smiled out at Kettering. He said, "How did you find me?"

"I went to the Police Building looking for you. Your lieutenant told me you're taking a few days off."

"Did he tell you why?"

"Nope. He didn't tell me why you moved out of your house, either."

"I needed a change of scenery."

"It wasn't because of the other night, was it?"

"Not the night you're thinking about."

"You mean you were doing it with somebody else?"

"I mean 'doing it' has nothing to do with me moving."

"Well, that's good." She looked across at his car. The carton and suitcases were visible through the back window. "Need any help with that stuff?"

"It's just a couple of suitcases and a box."

"I can carry something. I'm very strong."

"Come on, then."

She got out of the car, giving him a flash of silken leg as her apple-green skirt hiked up. They crossed the street together and Kettering gave her the carton. He saw she wasn't kidding about her strength as she carried it effortlessly up the stairs ahead of him. He put the two bags down when they reached the landing and keyed open the door.

The apartment was one room - an efficient layout where you lived, ate, slept, without walking more than a few feet. The kitchen alcove was more or less screened from the rest of the room by a hanging curtain. Behind it was a rust-stained sink, two-burner gas range, and small refrigerator.

There was a tiny separate bathroom with sink, toilet, and a curtained shower stall. The furniture - chrome and Formica table, mismatched chairs, convertible sofa - bore mysterious stains and cigarette burns from the forgotten butts of anonymous former tenants.

"Nice place," Charity said.

"All the comforts."

She set the carton down on the kitchen table and poked through the contents until she found the Wild Turkey bottle.

"Are you saving this for a special occasion?"

"I guess this is it. I'll see if I can find some glasses."

He located a pair of mismatched tumblers in the cupboard and a tray of ice cubes in the refrigerator.

"All the comforts," he repeated, offering Charity a glass.

She nodded toward the sofa. "Does that thing make into a bed?"

"Damned if I know."

"Let's find out," she said.

It did.

***

Two hours later they lay side by side on the uneven mattress of the folded-out sofa bed. Charity propped herself up on an elbow and brushed a hand through the graying hair on Kettering's chest.

"I missed you," she said.

"It's been what, two days?"

"I don't mean since the last time I saw you, I mean just now. You weren't exactly totally involved, were you?"

"You're telling me the earth didn't move?"

She smacked him hard on the stomach. "Will you quit doing shtick from *Moonlighting*? Something's bothering you, isn't it? I mean something more visible than the trouble at home."

"Okay," he said. "Something's bothering me." He waited. "So, aren't you going to ask me what?" he said at last.

"Nope. I figure if you want to tell me, you will. If you don't, I'm not going to drag it out of you."

"Since you insist," he said, "I'll tell you about it."

And to his surprise, he did. He told her about the shooting on his doorstep of the child who wasn't there. When she made no comment, he went all the way back to the church picnic and started over with the strange conversation he'd overhead, and the mental curtain that had dropped over what he'd seen in the house on Bailey Street. If he'd really seen anything. He told her about his life after his father died and the coming of the Greasers. He even found himself telling her about Uncle Art and his story of Doomstalker and how it haunted him. When he stopped talking he was

exhausted.

He rolled over in the sofa bed and looked at her. "Do I sound like a nut case?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Thanks."

"But you know what?"

"What?"

"I think your Doomstalker is real."

"You're kidding me."

She ignored this. "And you know what else?"

Kettering sat up and looked down at Charity. Her eyes were clear, her expression grave.

"Tell me," he said.

"I think he's found you."

Chapter 12

Charity put her face close to the door of the bathroom. She spoke loudly to carry over the sound of the shower inside.

"You hungry?"

Kettering called back, "Yeah."

"Where do you keep the food?"

"What food?"

"Don't you have any food?"

"Give me a break, I just moved in."

"There's a 7-Eleven on the corner. I'll run down and get something."

The hiss of the shower stopped. Kettering opened the door, dripping wet, a towel around his waist.

"You don't have to do that."

"I'm on my way." She pulled his wet face down and kissed him. "I'll be back by the time you get out of there."

She did not quite make it, but by the time Kettering had toweled himself dry and dressed in fresh jeans and a T-shirt with a picture of Clint Eastwood and a legend reading MAKE MY DAY, she was back with two big bags full of groceries. He sat at the kitchen table and watched appreciatively while she pulled out the utensils that had come with the apartment and went to work on the small gas range.

"You've got nice kitchen moves," he said.

"Don't expect this kind of service all the time," she told him. "I'm not what you'd call a career homemaker."

"Smells good," Kettering said. "What is it?"

"Hamburger and onions, cream of tomato soup, sourdough bread, cheddar cheese. A gourmet's delight."

"Terrific."

They ate in companionable silence, sharing a bottle of French Columbard Charity had brought from the market.

When they had finished, Kettering lit a cigarette. "Did you mean what you said before?"

"What was that?"

"About my phantom - the Doomstalker - being real."

"I meant it."

"You're not just humoring a stressed-out cop?"

"Dammit, Kettering, don't you know me at all? I do not humor people. I am telling you I think your Doomstalker exists. Sure, maybe you're crazy, maybe we're both crazy, but God help me, I believe you. I think this bogey of yours is real and it's found you. So don't get cute with me."

Kettering stared at her across the table. "Sorry."

He finished his cigarette and ground it out against the side of an empty coffee can.

"You need ashtrays," Charity said.

"I'll decorate later."

"You started to tell me about your sister."

He looked at her sharply.

"Where is she now?"

"At a place up in Ojai. A hospital. I had her moved out here from Indiana. Don't ask me why."

"What do you mean?"

Kettering tapped the side of his head. "Her mind's gone. It doesn't make any difference to Jessie where she is."

"You can't really be sure of that."

"Maybe not."

Charity studied his expression. "You really love your sister, don't you?"

"I suppose."

"Do you ever tell her?"

He answered her with a dark look.

"Kettering, you just don't want anybody to suspect you've got a heart. Why don't we go and see your sister?"

"We?"

"Why not? If we're going to whip this Doomstalker business together, I'm going to have to be included in your life. At least for a while."

"Why do you want to get mixed up in this?" he said.

"Because I like hanging out with you?"

"Not good enough."

"Okay, call it a career move. I'm tired of standing in front of a building with the sun in my eyes, staring into a minicam and reciting twenty seconds worth of on-the-spot news. If somehow, on some plane, this monster of yours does exist - and right now I'm ready to say it does - I am going to have an exclusive on one hell of

a story."

"For who? *National Enquirer?"*

"Come on, Kettering, think big. I can already see a book, serialization, movie rights."

"Why not T-shirts and a stuffed toy that clings to car windows with suction-cup hands and feet?"

"Don't try to be clever, Kettering, it doesn't suit you."

"Okay, so we go after it together and you get rich and famous."

"Maybe. And you get rid of whatever's haunting you. Maybe."

"You're sure you want to get involved?"

"Hell, Kettering, I *am* involved. Are you going to argue?"

He raised his glass to her. "Nope."

"You learned something, anyway."

Charity refilled their glasses with wine and they drank.

"So let's go see your sister," she said.

"Okay, but I don't think it will do much good."

"How long since you've talked to her?"

Kettering smiled grimly. "Thirty years. It's been more than a year since I've even been up to see her. Jessie doesn't speak. She doesn't react."

"She's catatonic?"

"That's the word."

"So when do we leave?"

"Are you available tomorrow morning?"

"I'm available."

"What about your job?"

"I'll take a leave of absence."

"You're pretty sure this is going to work out, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

Kettering could hold his frown only so long. He relaxed into a grin. "I'll pick you up at ten. "

***

The drive north on the Ventura Freeway was a pleasant one. In the morning most of the traffic was commuters heading the other way into Los Angeles to work. Kettering felt relaxed and good with the window rolled down to a pleasant sea breeze and the vital redheaded woman beside him. He could almost forget the dark circumstances that had brought them together.

"You haven't asked what happened to my sister," he said.

"I figured you'd tell me when you were ready."

"Since you insist on being a part of this, you might as well hear it now." Kettering let the rhythm of the freeway take his mind back. Back to Prescott and a time he did not want to remember.

"It started with the Greasers. I told you about them."

He could sense Charity's nod.

"Jessie wouldn't listen to anybody ..."

With Charity sitting silently beside him, intent on his words, Kettering told the story.

The warnings of her mother, the anger of her little brother, the disapproval of her schoolmates and the town in general, did nothing to pull Jessie Kettering away from the newcomers. If

anything, she spent even more time with the Greasers, in open defiance of everybody. She partied with them in the park, she walked down the street arm in arm with them. She rode behind them on their motorcycles. Sometimes she came home walking unsteadily and smelling of cigarettes and beer.

Finally, as the townspeople neared the end of their patience, the Greasers decided to leave. Word circulated among the young people of Prescott that they were planning a big farewell party at their grubby campground. It was to be, so went the word, a total orgy. While the citizens hoped the "farewell" part was true, they strictly forbade their sons and daughters to go anywhere near the ragged settlement on the designated night.

Lucille Kettering gave orders that her daughter was not even to leave the house. This, of course, guaranteed that Jessie would somehow attend.

That night Brian lay fully dressed, awake in his bed while his mother, tired from a day of inventory-taking at the shop, fell quickly into a deep sleep. When he heard the window in his sister's room slide softly in its frame, he climbed out of bed, crossed to his own window, and looked out.

Jessie, dressed in a pink blouse, white cardigan sweater, and the jeans their mother hated because they were so tight, stepped down to the soft grass and hurried furtively across the lawn to the street. Brian pushed the window up in its frame, eased himself out, and followed.

Jessie walked quickly two blocks down Bailey Street to the intersection with Rose Avenue. Brian kept close to the bushes, staying about half a block behind her. Several times Jessie stopped to look back, but he was quick enough to jump into the shadows before she saw him.

At the intersection Jessie stood outside the pool of light thrown by the streetlamp. There she waited. Every minute or so she checked her wristwatch, peering expectantly down Rose Avenue as though she were waiting for a bus. Brian crouched behind a brick wall back up the street and waited with her. The night closed in and it got

cold. He wished he had thought to grab a jacket.

After a quarter of an hour he heard the snarl of a motorcycle approaching. One of the Greasers wheeled up, spun his heavy bike under the streedamp, and slid over to the curb where Jessie was standing. The Greaser said something Brian could not hear and laughed. His sister climbed onto the saddle seat behind him. He revved the motor a couple of times and they roared off into the night.

Brian knew where they were going. He ran the two blocks back to his house, got his Schwinn three-speed out of the garage, and pedaled furiously for the edge of town where the Greasers had set up their camp.

Half a mile away he could clearly hear the music. Loud, pounding, dissonant. It made Elvis's "Jailhouse Rock" sound like a hymn. And the Everly Brothers' "Wake Up Little Susie," considered risque by the parents of Prescott, was sugary sweet by comparison. This music was savage, with whanging guitars and a thumping, sensual drumbeat that stirred alien emotions even in twelve-year-old Brian Kettering.

As he drew near, he could see the flames of a bonfire licking at the night sky. He walked his bicycle as close as he dared, then hid it behind a clump of brush and crept still closer.

The tents and makeshift shelters were arranged in a ragged circle. Parked safely within the circle were the motorcycles, shiny and powerful. The fire blazed in the center of the clearing. Around it the Greasers gyrated and stomped in some primeval dance.

Crawling as close as he dared, Brian could make out the red, sweaty faces contorted in some savage emotion. Most of the dancers were bare to the waist, some completely naked. Their faces and bodies were smeared with some dark substance. Blood?

From their gaping mouths came no words, but the howls and barks of animals. They leaped and spun and stomped and flailed their arms like souls in torment. Brian strained forward, terrified yet fascinated. He squinted so he could peer through the flames,

looking for his sister. For a moment he clutched at a small hope that maybe, maybe she wasn't here. Then he found her.

Jessie danced in the circle with the others, her mouth wide, teeth biting at the darkness. Her sweater was gone, her blouse was open all the way down the front and pulled out of her waistband. She wore no bra. Brian stared with a guilty mixture of arousal and disgust at the bouncing rhythm of his sister's firm young breasts.

The tempo of the music increased. The dancers grew more frenzied. One of the males grabbed Jessie and pulled her against him. She leaned into his body and did not resist. Her captor lowered his head and took one of her breasts into his mouth.

Brian had to do something or he would burst. He stood up, still not sure whether he was going to yell or run down there or call his sister's name or what.

He never had a chance to do anything. A hand hard as sun-baked leather clamped over his nose and mouth. Brian tasted sweat and dirt and motor oil. He struggled to pull the hand from his face, but it would not budge. His chest heaved. Darkness squeezed in around the outside of his vision as he fought vainly to pull air into his lungs.

Just as he felt his chest must burst, the hand eased its grip enough to let him snort in a noseful of air.

A grainy voice rasped close to his ear. "Little boy, do you want to die?"

Brian's eyes watered at the stink of rotten teeth. He shook his head.

"Then get your skinny little ass back on that bicycle and get the fuck out of here. Don't come back. And don't tell anybody what you saw. If you do, we'll come after you."

The hand released him, and Brian ran stumbling and gasping back to where he had stashed the bike. He jumped on and pedaled away at top speed, his eyes streaming from the wind in his face and from the shame of being unable to help his sister.

What could he do? Tell his mother? Call the police?

We'll come after you.

What good would it do? Jessie was there by her own choice. God help her. Nobody else could now.

Back at home Brian got into bed and lay there staring up at the hanging model of a P-51 Mustang that turned slowly in the air currents of the darkened room. The luminous dial of his wristwatch read four o'clock when he heard the soft scrape of Jessie's shoe on the windowsill. He eased out of bed and went to her room.

Jessie stood between the open window and the bed and stared at him with strange wide eyes. There were blue-green bruises on her arms. Her blouse was misbuttoned, the jeans were torn at the knee. The crotch was stained.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right."

"I know where you went tonight."

"What of it?"

"If they ... hurt you, we can call the police."

"Nobody hurt me."

"What *did* they do to you?"

"Leave me alone. I'm tired."

"Did you drink something? Or smoke some of their dope?"

"What do you know about dope?"

"I know plenty. Did you? Did you?"

Jessie flared out at him. "Goddamn it, get out of here, you little shit.

What I do is none of your business."

The cruel words hit Brian like an open-handed slap. He stood looking at his sister for a moment, then turned and walked back to his own room. It was dawn before he fell asleep. A shallow sleep shot through with ugly dreams.

***

The day after the farewell orgy, the Greasers were gone. As dawn lightened the Indiana sky, those citizens who were awake heard the cycles roar down the deserted main street of Prescott and away, heading for God knew where. Their stay in town had been only a month, but it seemed like a long, long time.

The clearing where they had lived was a left a morass of rotting food, filthy rags, discarded clothing, wine bottles, beer cans, rubbers, and excrement. A group of local farmers got together and plowed the whole field under. They planted sawgrass, which grows anywhere, but the fouled soil of the Greasers' field remained barren, and the stink hung in the air for many months.

***

No one in the Kettering house spoke of Jessie's midnight visit to the bikers' camp. Brian kept his distance and said nothing. If Lucille knew her daughter had disobeyed, she never let on. Jessie wore long sleeves to cover her bruises, and was quieter than usual in the days that followed.

Then one morning Brian walked into the unlocked bathroom to find Jessie on tiptoe in front of the medicine-cabinet mirror. She wore only a bra and panties, and she had the panties pulled down to where the downy pubic hair began.

Brian began at once to back out, then he stopped and stared.

Jessie turned toward him. She did not look angry, only afraid. She made no move to cover herself in front of her brother.

"Oh, Bri," she said, "something awful has happened."

He stood in the doorway, unable to speak.

"I'm pregnant."

He heard the words and he knew what they meant, but Brian could not at that moment think about his sister's condition. He could not pull his eyes away from the angry red blotch on her abdomen.

"What's that?" he said.

Jessie touched the reddened area. "I don't know. Some kind of a rash, I guess. That's the least of my worries."

Brian did not think so. He thought it might be the very worst of her worries. The angry red rash was vaguely man-shaped, with hunched shoulders and long dangling arms. The mark of the Doomstalker.

***

Kettering fell silent. He turned off the freeway to the tree-lined state highway leading to Ojai. Charity reached over and touched his shoulder.

"What a rotten experience for you two kids," she said. "It's not surprising that it damaged your sister's mind."

"That didn't do it. Jessie was shook up, but she was a tough kid. There's more to the story."

Charity sat back to listen, but Kettering braked the car abruptly. To their left was a stone archway with an open wrought-iron gate. A plaque on one of the stone pillars read:

GOOD SHEPHERD
CONVALESCENT HOME

"We're here," he said.

Chapter 13

The name Good Shepherd Convalescent Home always brought a sour taste to Kettering's mouth. As far as he knew, nobody who was brought in here ever convalesced. Nobody got better. People were brought here to be housed in reasonable comfort until they died.

The setting, at least, was pleasant. Once inside the gate, the road curved gently through grounds that were green and leafy with a profusion of bushes and shade trees. The Spanish colonial buildings, white with red-tile roofs, were backed up against the Topatopa Mountains. The ocean was close enough to provide a tang of salt when the wind was from the west.

The patients, most of them old, old, sat in wheelchairs along the curving walkways. Despite the warmth of the day, plaid blankets were spread across their laps. Their gnarled hands lay inert upon the blankets, their eyes dimly focused somewhere else in time. White-coated attendants lounged nearby, ready to move in if anyone died.

Charity clung to Kettering's arm as they walked up the long, white stone path to the main building. He was keenly aware of the energy of this woman, her youth and vitality. It sparked like a current of life in this place of old age, infirmity, madness, and death.

A gray-haired nurse with sad eyes greeted them in a clean, unused-looking living room. Through an archway they could see two ancient men sitting like frozen corpses across from each other over a checkerboard. There were no checkers on the board.

When Kettering gave his sister's name, the nurse led them into a small office. There she consulted a timetable.

"Your sister is in locotherapy right now."

"Is that what it sounds like?" Kettering asked.

The nurse gave him an indulgent smile. "From the Latin *loco*, movement. It involves an attendant helping the patient move her limbs. Without it her muscles would atrophy."

"How soon can we see her?"

"She'll be back in her room in twenty minutes. You can wait in our game room if you like." She caught Kettering's expression. "Or you may prefer to wait out here in the parlor."

"The parlor is fine."

Kettering and Charity took seats next to each other on a couch. He picked up a magazine, saw the title, *Golden Years*, put it down.

"*Locotherapy*," he said, shaking his head.

"You were telling me what happened to your sister that brought her here," Charity said.

Kettering started to light a cigarette, saw there were no ashtrays in the room, shoved the pack back into his pocket.

He said, "Jessie's pregnancy was hell for all of us. This was just before the era of free love and let-it-all-hang-out and if-it-feels-good-do-it. Anyway, in a small town like Prescott, having an illegitimate child back then was a major scandal. Probably still is."

"So she had the child," Charity said.

"Jessie was determined. I was only twelve at the time, but I knew what an abortion was and I pleaded with her to get one. Naturally, nobody listened to me. What with my mother's religious convictions and Jessie's stubbornness, the pregnancy ran its course. It wasn't a happy time for any of us. Jessie was sick most of the time. People stopped coming to Mom's shop, and money got short. Neither Mom nor Jessie were talking to me, and I had this terrible feeling that we still hadn't seen the worst of this mess."

"And were you right?"

"God help me, I was right."

"Tell me about it. "

***

The fateful telephone call, he told her, came in the last week of March. It was a day that had started out with a promise of spring, and Jessie, eight months pregnant, had made one of her few trips downtown alone. Mostly, she just slouched around the house getting bigger and more surly. It was a relief to Brian to have her out of the house for a while, but his mother kept returning to the window, watching for the girl's return.

In the middle of the afternoon a wind came down from the north, bringing with it angry clouds and a hard, granular snow. Brian's mother pulled a sweater around her shoulders and worried aloud whether Jessie was dressed warmly enough.

When the telephone rang, Brian and his mother looked at each other with a sudden shared foreboding. Lucille Kettering picked up the instrument reluctantly, as though it were some loathsome live thing.

She said hello and listened. Brian saw his mother grow older as he watched. Her face sagged and the light dimmed in her eyes. Finally she hung up and turned to him.

"Your sister is at the hospital. She's been badly hurt. I'm going to her now."

"Hurt?"

"Yes. They wouldn't give me any details."

"I want to come too," Brian said.

"I - I don't know if you should."

"Mom, I want to."

Lucille Kettering was in no condition to argue. Together they went

out to the garage and got into the rusting '51 Ford they couldn't afford to trade in. Mrs. Kettering backed out onto Bailey Street and drove off toward City Hospital, seven miles away.

Just enough snow had fallen to make the streets slippery. Visibility was bad as the tired windshield wipers struggled against the snow. Condensation on the inside of the glass made it even harder to see, yet what appeared in the street dead ahead of them was clearly etched forever in Brian's memory.

It came from nowhere. Just all of a sudden it was there in front of the car. Tall, maybe seven feet. Big, hunched-up shoulders, long arms that reached toward them with taloned hands.

Doomstalker.

Brian could not remember whether his mother spoke or cried out or made any sound at all. He knew she hit the brakes and the car slid toward the waiting figure, angling to the right and seeming actually to pick up speed. He saw the big shadow shape filling the windshield, shutting out all light. Then the impact.

***

"I didn't know until much later what we were supposed to have hit," Kettering said. "A light pole, they told me. Somehow it came through my mother's window. Crushed her skull. Killed her instantly.

"I was thrown out the other side of the car. Hit my head, I guess. I couldn't remember much of anything for a long time. Traumatic temporary amnesia they called it."

"How awful for you," Charity said. "What happened to your sister and ... the baby?"

"She had the baby. That's all I knew for sure. I spent some time in the hospital getting my head patched up, then they sent me to live with my aunt Alice in Milwaukee. I still didn't have any clear idea of what happened or even, for sure, who I was. Gradually, over the next five years or so, my memory came back, but there are still

blank spots."

"Did you find out what happened to the baby?"

"Jessie had taken an ugly beating when they found her in an alley. Massive injuries - head, body, internal. Ugly stuff, they tell me. She was in a coma for a month. Nobody thought she'd live. But she did. Sort of. The kid was okay, but Jessie was in no shape to take care of it, so they put it in a foster home."

Charity was thoughtful. "Did you ever see your Doomstalker again after the car crash?"

"Never. Never even thought much about it until a month ago, when things started to go sour in my life."

Charily nodded. "That's when it found you."

Kettering stared at her. "You've got a theory?"

"How old would that baby be now?"

"Thirty."

"Any idea what became of him?"

"No. I never wanted to find out."

"If only you could get your sister to talk ..."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Finally Charity spoke.

"You know, I've got a real crazy idea knocking around in my head."

"I wonder if it's the same one that's been giving me headaches," Kettering said.

"That Jessie's baby, conceived in that devilish orgy and born in an ugly storm, is - "

Kettering finished it for her. "Doomstalker."

The gray-haired nurse came in on silent rubber soles. She said, "You

can see your sister now. She's in Room 216 right at the top of the stairs."

Kettering and Charity rose and started out of the room.

"I hope you're not expecting too much," the nurse said.

"I've been here before," Kettering told her.

They climbed the wide stairs together, and when they reached the room, Charity plucked at Kettering's arm. "I think you ought to go in alone this time."

"But coming here was your idea," he said.

"Jessica doesn't know me. If she's going to talk at all, it will be to her brother, not some stranger. I'll wait down there at the end of the hall, where it looks like a sitting room."

She gave Kettering a quick kiss on the cheek and walked away from him. He looked after her a moment, then drew a deep breath and entered his sister's room.

Jessica shared the room with two other women who occupied the beds on either side of her. One of them looked old beyond counting. Her face had collapsed inward, pulling her forehead and chin together toward her nose. She held a large drawing tablet in one bony hand. In the other she gripped a felt-tip crayon and drew shaky lines on the paper. She hummed very softly from somewhere inside her scrawny chest. She gave no sign that she was aware a man had entered the room.

The other woman was grossly fat. She lay on her back, a mound of moist, doughy flesh, her mouth open, snoring juicily.

Jessica sat propped up by pillows, staring straight ahead. Her skin was smooth, pale, and without wrinkle or blemish. She might have been coated with epoxy. The blue veins stood out on the backs of her hands and crawled up her wrists to the cuff of her long-sleeved nightgown.

"Hello, Jessie," Kettering said. He felt foolish, as he always did when

talking to what remained of his sister.

"You're looking good." *Jesus, that was dumb. She looked lost, was what she looked. Lost and blank and empty.*

He pulled a chair over close to her bed and sat.

"Jessie, I'm in some trouble." *I must be crazy talking to this vegetable.*

No response.

Kettering cleared his throat and went on. "Remember how when we were little kids and I would mess up sometimes, you would help me if you could? I think you can help me now, Jessie. If you're ever going to talk again, please do it now." *Oh, God, please make Jessie hear me.*

Nothing.

"It's very important, Jessie. Please help me." *A waste of time. An idiotic waste of time.*

Not a flicker of expression showed on Jessica's waxy face. Her mouth did not twitch. Her eyes did not blink.

Does anything go on in that poor blasted mind? Anything at all? What sensations, if any, got past that wall between her and the real, living world? Did she feel? Did she think?

***

Brian had grown up to be a fine-looking man, Jessica thought. He could stand to lose ten pounds, but then, he had always been stocky. Or Was he thinner when he was little? She could not be sure. Time splintered and came together for Jessica in odd fragments, like colored bits of glass in a kaleidoscope.

He was asking her for help. That was funny. She would laugh if she could. There was no way she could help him or anybody. She couldn't even help herself back when she needed to so desperately.

Like at the party of the Greasers.

Going to that party had seemed so important to her. She would show everybody that she was her own person. People started treating her differently after Papa died. Like she had changed somehow because of it. All right, she would show them what changing was all about.

There had been a small sting of guilt on that night long ago as she slipped out of her bedroom window. It had been so easy. Mama had forbidden her to go out, and had believed her daughter would, as always, do as she was told. It was so easy. But once she was out of the house, the doubts began to nibble at her. She began to wonder if this was really going to be as much fun as she had thought. If it was really worth what she was risking.

By the time she got to the corner and stood under the streetlight waiting for Wildman to come and get her, she was cold and afraid. She didn't really know him. Wildman wasn't even a real name. None of them had real names. They were Wildman and Red and Stork and Fazer and Dill. The girls were Tootie and Jugs and Panther and Moon. As she stood there shivering on the corner, she had almost turned back and run for home and her warm, safe bed. Almost. How different her life would have been if she had.

But then Wildman was there straddling his heavy black motorcycle, making the engine rumble, and she was climbing on behind him, gripping the front of his leather jacket. He roared away and the wind snatched at her hair and filled her nostrils with the rank odor of his body.

They gave her pills at the campground. And something sweet to drink. They passed around marijuana, or something stronger to smoke. Jessie took everything they offered her. In a little while she felt wild and free and like she was one small part of a huge body that contained all of them.

The music thumped and whanged. The fire leaped into great towering shapes that were alive. The fire looked down on them with eyes of flame as they danced.

And how they danced. Wildly and without restraint. Clothing flew off. Sweating bodies all mixed up and tangled together, grunting,

straining, yelling, screaming.

How many of them did it to her? Jessica never knew for sure. Wildman, Red, Stork, all of them had her. Fucked her. Over and over pumping away at her until she was raw down there and her insides felt like they would drop out.

***

Brian was talking to her again. His voice was nice. Deep and strong, like Papa's. He was asking her about ... about ... about...

Oh, Jesus God, the baby.

She had known it was about to come on that day in April. She felt it squirm inside her and she knew it was coming. And she didn't want it to come at home, and she was afraid to have it come at a hospital. She had gone out and she just walked around and around feeling it wriggle in her belly trying to burst out. Jessie had walked and cried and wished she could die.

And then the wind turned cold and it started snowing. And the baby came. With a great tearing convulsion. she fell down in the alley behind the Tastee Freeze. Her body cramped and she pushed and whimpered while the baby wriggled itself out of her.

Blinded for a moment by tears and sweat, she groped around on the rough blacktop surface, searching for her child. She found it. Red, wrinkled, ugly beyond imagination, it was still her baby. She pulled it close, compelled by the mother's urge to hold and nurture her offspring. She lifted the tiny body, looked into its face, and screamed.

After that there was a pain-blurred interval filled with tiny teeth that slashed at her, small, hard fists and feet that pounded and kicked her with a strength that was not human. Unbelieving, Jessica still tried to clasp the monster to her breast. She was not strong enough to keep its teeth from her flesh - teeth such as no earthly child should be born with.

Jessica's world dissolved then into pain and silence. Her poor

mutilated psyche crawled back into the shadowed recesses of her mind, there to hide away from everyone and everything for as long as she had to go on living.

***

"Where are you, Jessie?" Kettering said softly. "Way off by yourself somewhere? I know you can't hear me, and so you can't help me. Maybe it's better for you this way. Life has not treated you well. I guess you deserve to hide, if that's what you want."

He stood up and leaned over the bed. Jessica continued to stare at the far wall, seeing pictures that no one else saw. Kettering kissed his sister lightly on the cheek. Her flesh was smooth and waxy and cool.

"Good-bye, Jessie," he said. At the door he stopped and turned. His jaw creaked with the words, but he got them out. "I love you."

A single tear oozed from Jessica's right eye and slid down her cheek, leaving a wet silvery trail. But her brother was gone and the door was closed. No one was there to see.

Chapter 14

The drive back down from Ojai was completed largely in silence. Charity made sporadic comments about the scenery or the fine weather; Kettering answered in grunts and monosyllables. He parked on the street in front of his apartment and they climbed the wooden stairs together.

Inside they sat together on the sofa. "I'm sorry," Charity said. "I know that couldn't have been easy for you. I guess it was a bad idea."

Kettering shrugged. "I've seen my sister quite a few times over the years. There wasn't any reason to think this time would be any different."

"Don't worry, we'll get you out of this yet."

Charity gave him a hug. He felt again the surprising physical strength of the slim body.

"I'm not even sure what I have to be got out of." Kettering backed away from her and looked around the room, frowning.

"Something wrong?" Charity asked.

"Nothing important."

"Well, let's hear it," she said with a touch of exasperation.

"It's just that I miss my chair. It was nothing but a beat-up old recliner, but I could always get comfortable in it. The furniture in this place looks like it was recycled from a cheap motel."

"Hey, you don't have to stay here," she said. "There's plenty of room at my place."

"This place is all right," he said. "I don't really mind the tacky furniture, and I don't need any more space, I just miss my chair."

"I've got plenty of chairs. I mean, it would just be temporary. It would be a lot ... handier."

Kettering grinned at her. "Cozier too. Honey, I appreciate the offer, but I think we'd better leave things the way they are. At least for now."

"If you say so. Consider it a standing offer."

"Be careful or I might grab it one of these days."

"Wouldn't you like to grab something else too?"

"Aren't you being a touch aggressive?"

"It's my journalistic training. You want to do something about it?"

Kettering moved toward her to accept the challenge but was interrupted by a knock at the door.

He looked a question at her; she shrugged. He said, "Hold the thought," crossed the room to answer the knock.

Al Diaz stood outside on the landing. He looked at Kettering, then at Charity, then back to Kettering.

"I'm not interrupting?"

"Come on in, Al. You know Charity Moline, don't you?"

"The TV news lady."

Charity smiled and offered her hand.

"My partner, Al Diaz," Kettering said.

Diaz shook her hand awkwardly. He looked around the tiny apartment. "Nice place."

"That's what everybody says."

Diaz walked over and touched the telephone and answering machine. "You got a phone already?"

"They're very swift since deregulation."

"You, uh, making the change permanent?"

"I'll have to see. How's business?"

"Slow. Nobody's fired a shot since you left."

"Who you working with?"

Diaz made a sour face. "Carlucci."

"The garlic eater?"

"When we ride together, I have to hang my head out the window. He must gargle with the stuff. When you coming back?"

"Soon. There's something I want to take care of before I do."

"Does it have anything to do with your boy?"

"Trevor? Not directly. Why?"

"I've been nosing around that hole you told me he hangs out at, The Pit."

"Something happening down there?"

"I'd swear there is, but I can't get a handle on it. They've got a bar, but as far as I can see, they keep the minors out of it. And there's no evidence of drugs."

"This isn't part of your job, is it?"

"It's on my own time, but don't worry, I'll let you pay me back."

"Thanks. Anything on the guy who runs it?"

"Enzo DuLac. There isn't much. He's thirty, unmarried, lives alone. A sleaze. Hauled in for pandering, dealing, assault, contributing. No

convictions."

"So how come he's got a liquor license?"

"He just manages the place. It'll take some time in the city files to find out who really owns it."

"Any chance of a bust?"

"All we've got are the usual neighborhood complaints - kids fornicating and pissing on the lawns." He remembered Charity. "Excuse me."

She smiled. "That's all right, Al, I've heard the words before."

"You know what happens when we try to clean up that stuff."

"They get a lawyer, he gets an injunction, and we have to sit on our hands for six months while some committee studies the situation."

"That's about it. I would bet you there's bad stuff going down at DuLac's place, but I haven't got the evidence to nail him."

"That sounds familiar."

"I'll keep digging. There's got to be something we can use to throw a scare into the sucker, if nothing else."

"Thanks, Al. I really do owe you."

"Damn right you do. But I'm not doing this just for you. I don't like to see barfbags like DuLac walking around."

Kettering walked him to the door. "If you get anything, buzz me."

"Will do." Diaz turned to Charity. "Nice to see you again."

"Likewise," she said.

When they were alone, Charity said, "What's the next move?"

"I'd like to jump on this DuLac myself, but that's just a diversion. What I think I'd better do is take a trip back to where this all began.

See what I can find out there."

"Your hometown?"

He nodded. "Prescott, Indiana. I haven't been back in thirty years, since my mother was killed and I was shipped off to live with my aunt Alice in Milwaukee."

"That was right after your sister had the baby."

"Right. Maybe I can find out what happened to that baby."

"Want me to come with you?"

"Thanks, but I can move faster alone."

Charity came over and stood close to him. "Remember that thought you told me to hold?"

He wrapped his arms around her. "Good work, Miss Moline. Put yourself in for a raise."

This time they did not bother to fold out the sofa bed.

Chapter 15

In the Sixteen years since he packed wife and child into the station wagon and drove west from Columbus to take the California job, Brian Kettering had flown over the midwest half a dozen times as he traveled from one coast to the other. But except for a Christmas visit to Milwaukee ten years ago, he had not touched down there. As for Prescott, the town where he was born, the town of terrible memories, Kettering had thought nothing could induce him to return, even for a single day. He was wrong.

The landscape below looked harmless and peaceful from the DC-10 at thirty thousand feet. The neat squared-off sections showed varying shades of green and brown, with tiny speckles of towns breaking the symmetry. Kettering glanced out the window only occasionally as he concentrated on the notebook in his lap. In it he had written:

Check out Jessie's baby
1. Hall of records
2. Hospital
3. Post Office
4. Newspaper
5. School
6. Friends/neighbors

Missing persons was not Kettering's department, but he remembered enough of the basics to get started. If the trail was there, he would find it.

He rented a Chevy Nova at O'Hare and drove south from Chicago through tough Gary and along I-65, which bypassed most of the towns he remembered.

When he turned east on Indiana 16 he felt a quickening of his pulse

as he drove unhindered through the rich farm country. There was no way ... *no way* he could think of Prescott as home, yet there was an unmistakable twinge of homecoming as he covered the last twenty miles.

Entering the town was no big deal. A sign announced the population and elevation, Another displayed the symbols of the local service clubs. He passed a junkyard, a nursery, a Burger King, a Shell station, and suddenly he was in Prescott.

The streets, the trees, the buildings, the people all looked smaller than he remembered. A matter of perspective, Kettering supposed. The buildings were the same, some with new facades, but most of the stores he remembered from his childhood were gone or replaced. Where his mother had her card and gift shop, there was now a computer store. The times had not completely passed Prescott by.

Despite some new electric signs and a flashy new Cadillac dealership on Main Street, Prescott remained hopelessly small town. To other eyes it might have been charming rural Americana. To Kettering it was bad memories.

One thing had not changed. On every available wall and pole that would support one was mounted a basket. Some had nets, some had backboards, some were naked iron hoops. None of them was idle. Boys of all ages dribbled, passed, shot, rebounded, shot again. The state religion: basketball. A curious parallel to the blighted neighborhoods of the big eastern cities, with one major difference: all of the young Indiana players he saw were white.

Before getting down to business, Kettering took a quick tour of the town he had known. Quick because there was not all that much to tour in the first place; even quicker because much of what he remembered was gone.

Hoosier Park, for instance, scene of the long-ago church picnic. In its place was what appeared to be a junior college, somnolent in the summer, with a scattering of students strolling along the paths between the buildings or lounging under the trees.

His father's church remained. The sign out in front announced the subject of Sunday's sermon:

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?
GENESIS IV : 9

Good question, Kettering thought. I'll bet the answer hasn't changed since my father's day.

He drove slowly along Bailey Street. Most of the same houses were still there, repainted and relandscaped, but recognizably the same houses. They built things to last in those days. The street itself was in good repair, the neighborhood seemed to be holding its comfortable middle-class status.

He pulled to a stop in front of the house where he was born, where he had spent his first thirteen years, boyhood, and where his childhood had ended abruptly. He got out of the car and stood on the parking strip. The solid brick structure looked good for another hundred years. There were lacy curtains in the windows and a fresh coat of paint on the porch and trim around the windows. A tricycle waited at the foot of the steps for a rider.

The front door. Kettering had trouble focusing his vision on it. Dark inlaid wood with a heavy brass handle. It was, of course, not the same door. He squinted. Did the early morning light play tricks, or was there a shadow on the wood? A roughly man-shaped shadow? Kettering shook his head, annoyed with himself. No way. It was a trick of the light. Had to be.

As Kettering stood staring up at the porch of his childhood home, a chill seized him and he shuddered violently. Some impulse made him spin and look behind him.

Nobody there. Nothing.

He let an exasperated breath hiss through his teeth. Of course there was nothing there. He was losing it.

Kettering climbed back into the Nova, gunned the engine, and headed downtown.

The Prescott Municipal Hall of Records was located in one of the town's new buildings. A clean, colorless block of pink-tinged limestone, it also housed the city hall, police department, municipal court, and most other functions of the city government.

The lobby was clean and businesslike and smelled faintly of detergent. He located the Department of Vital Statistics on the lobby directory and climbed the marble stairs to the second floor.

The woman in charge of records, Mrs. Ludden, was rail-thin with carroty hair and glasses that tilted up at the corners. She clasped her hands in what appeared to be honest regret when Kettering told her what he wanted.

"I'm really sorry, but all the birth, marriage, and death records from those years were destroyed in the fire."

"Fire?" Somehow Kettering was not surprised.

"In 1975 the old Civic Building burned down. If you used to live here, you probably remember it."

"I remember it," Kettering said.

"It happened in the middle of the night. Place went up like a torch. The police thought it might have been deliberately set, but nothing was ever proved. It's a mercy no one was inside at the time."

"Yeah, lucky." Kettering thanked her briefly and walked out.

***

The hospital had suffered no fire. However, birth records were kept on the premises for only two years. At the end of that time they were turned over to - where else? - the hall of records.

Kettering did manage to obtain the name of the doctor who was head of pediatrics thirty years ago. He was retired now, living with his wife on the north side of Prescott. That was where the houses were bigger, the shade trees greener, the lawns lusher, and the people richer.

Dr. Robert Kohler and his wife lived in a Victorian house set well back from the street, surrounded by carefully groomed shrubbery. A driveway edged with box alder curved up from the street. Kettering drove up and parked behind an old, well-kept Lincoln. He approached the front door, rang the bell, and listened to the melodious chime inside.

A uniformed maid answered the door and after some persuasion led him back through the house to a sun porch where the doctor was working on a stamp collection with tweezers and a magnifying glass.

Dr. Kohler was a big man with pale skin, a sharp nose, and cloudy blue eyes. His eighty-some years showed in the slight tremor of his hands.

"Kettering," he repeated. "I know that name. Harlan Kettering. Minister, wasn't he?"

"That's right."

"You his boy?"

"Yes, sir. I'm Brian."

Dr. Kohler shook his head sadly. "The years do fly by. Your father died sudden, as I remember. Mother too. Unlucky family, the Ketterings."

Kettering was in no mood to reminisce. "What I wanted to ask was about my sister Jessica. She had a baby thirty years ago, when you were head of pediatrics at the hospital."

Kohler leaned back in his wicker chair, making it crack. He did not invite Kettering to sit.

"Jessie Kettering. I remember. Unmarried. Not much more than a baby herself. Bad business, that. She came in to us more dead than alive."

"The baby," Kettering said. "What do you remember about her baby?"

The doctor pulled off his wire-rimmed glasses and massaged the loose flesh around his eyes. "The baby. I get kind of hazy there. Strange little tyke."

"Strange how?"

"I'm not sure I could tell you. It's just an impression. It was thirty years ago, you know."

"Do you remember its name?"

"Never had one. Your sister was in no condition to be naming a baby. Or anything else. How'd she finally make out?"

"Not so good. What happened to it? The baby?"

"The court put it in a foster home."

Kettering sagged. "I suppose those records went up in the big fire of 'seventy-five too."

"Most likely. What is it you're after, anyway?"

"I'm trying to trace the child that was born to my sister. If I had the name of the foster parents, it would help."

"Shoot, you don't need records for that. I can tell you what their name was."

"You can?"

"Don't look so surprised. I'm not senile."

"I didn't mean to imply that you were, Doctor. It's just that it was so long ago."

"When you get old you remember some things, others you can't bring back for love or money. Don't ask me how it works. Some chemical action in the brain."

"The foster parents?" Kettering prompted.

"Isenbarger. Carl and Pauline Isenbarger."

"Do they still live here?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Never knew either of them personally." Dr. Kohler picked up the tweezers and magnifying glass, and Kettering might as well have turned invisible.

Kettering thanked the old man and left him with his stamp collection.

***

Back on the block that comprised downtown Prescott, Kettering went into Patty's Cafe and ordered coffee, a sweet roll, and the local telephone book. The book seemed not to have thickened any in the past thirty years.

He leafed through the pages rapidly to the *Is*. The only Isenbarger listed was Merle on River School Road. Kettering swallowed the last of the coffee, paid the cashier, and drove out to the address on the edge of town.

River School Road was well away from the suburblike neighborhoods Kettering remembered. Out here it was still farm country. He found the Isenbarger house by the name on the mailbox. It had been a farmhouse not too long ago, but now appeared to be separate.

Merle Isenbarger was a ruddy man who looked to be in his mid-forties. His polite expression frosted over when Kettering mentioned the names Carl and Pauline.

"They were my aunt and uncle," he said. "Why are you asking?"

"They adopted a baby thirty years ago. I'm trying to trace him down."

"Dorcas."

"Pardon me?"

"Dorcas. That's what they called the kid. It didn't involve me. I was living back in Pennsylvania at the time. Never was too close to my

uncle Carl, but I had to come back here to settle their estate. Once that was done, it just seemed like too much trouble to leave." Merle Isenbarger looked as though he'd like another chance at that decision. "So here I still am."

"Do you know what happened to the child?"

"Dorcas?" Isenbarger looked at him closely. "I guess you don't know about my aunt and uncle."

"No." Kettering tensed, getting ready for something he did not want to hear.

"They were killed. Murdered in their home."

"What happened?"

"They came in and surprised a burglar, so the police decided. Had to be a damned vicious burglar, if you ask me."

"And Dorcas?"

"Disappeared. There was quite a to-do about it at the time, but after a couple of months it died down. Nobody ever found hide nor hair. People figured the burglars must have killed the kid someplace else and hid the body. Doesn't hold water, as far as I'm concerned, but nobody came up with a better theory."

"What about you?" Kettering asked. "Do you have a theory?"

"It happened fifteen, sixteen years ago. Most people around here forgot all about it. What difference does it make what I think?"

"It could help me find the child."

Isenbarger looked down at his feet for a moment, then up into Kettering's eyes. "I think the kid killed them, chopped them up then lit out. Don't ask me for a motive."

"Do you have any pictures of Dorcas?"

"That's another weird thing. Uncle Carl was crazy about taking

pictures. Snapped anything and everything. Aunt Pauline stuck 'em all in albums. They must have had a couple thousand pictures, but not one of Dorcas. A lot of the pictures in the albums looked like they'd come out bad. Just a big blank. I can't figure out why my aunt would want to save them. Can you?"

Kettering could not. He left Merle Isenbarger, feeling a dark sense of futility. He spent only a little time tracking down people from the school, shopkeepers, friends and neighbors of the Isenbargers. No one, it seemed, had any clear recollection of the child known as Dorcas. It was as if their memories were blank, like the photographs in the Isenbargers' album.

On the flight back to Los Angeles Kettering pulled the shade down and tried to catch up on some of the sleep he had missed. No good. A tall, long-armed figure danced inside his head the moment he closed his eyes. His inner ear echoed with mocking laughter. Laughter of the Doomstalker.

Chapter 16

Detective, Alberto Diaz lived at the east end of the West Valley, where the community abutted Van Nuys. His was a comfortable, cozy little house in a neighborhood untouched so far by juvenile gangs. Al Diaz enjoyed his home and usually savored his arrival there after the work day. Tonight, however, his thoughts were elsewhere.

It was after ten o'clock when he pulled into the driveway and parked his van. His body was tired, his muscles ached, but his mind churned with the events of the day and the news he had to impart to his old partner. He got out of the van, locked it carefully, and headed for the house.

Michi Diaz had the door open and was standing just inside waiting for him as he approached. Slim and petite at thirty-five, she still looked like one of *The Mikado*'s three little maids from school. Diaz felt the welling up of love he always experienced when he came home to her, even after fifteen years.

"You look tired," she said.

"A little."

"I can heat up dinner in a minute. You must be hungry."

Diaz wrapped his arms around her. She felt frail as a bird, but he knew there was a sturdiness he would not have suspected in the woman's slight body.

"Just a sandwich, maybe, and a beer," he said. "I had a bite at the end of my shift."

"Not one of those fast-food burritos, I hope. You know what those

do to your stomach."

"My stomach is fine. Anyway, who ever heard of a Mexican who can't eat burritos? How would you like me to spread it around that you can't handle chopsticks?"

They laughed together. Both third-generation, thoroughly Americanized, they had heard every possible variation on the sushi-taco, Japanese-Mexican wisecrack. They bore them with good humor, and had a few private jokes of their own.

"You going to do more overtime this week?" she asked.

"This wasn't exactly overtime. I was checking out something personal for Brian."

"Poor Brian. Do you think he and Mavis are really through?"

"I think so. Brian wouldn't do something like this unless it was serious."

"So he's moved out."

"Looks like it. He rented some dump down near North Hollywood. "

"How's he adjusting?"

"To the split with Mavis? Not too badly, as far as I could see. He had that redheaded television newswoman from Channel Six at his place when I stopped by."

"Professionally?"

"It didn't look like it."

Michi was thoughtful for a moment. Then she said, "I always had the feeling things weren't quite right between him and Mavis."

"You never said anything to me."

"Why should I? It wasn't any of my business. Not as though Mavis and I were close. You and Brian were the partners."

"Yeah, well, he's got bigger problems now than a busted marriage."

"You mean the suspension?"

"That'll blow over. There's another problem. I'll fill you in later."

Michi did not press him. When he fell silent she said, "Maybe we should have him over for dinner. I doubt that he's eating well."

"I already asked him."

"So, ask him again. Make it definite for tomorrow."

"Okay. I've got to call him anyway." Diaz looked around. "Are the kids in bed?"

In answer to his question two dark-eyed, grinning little boys tumbled into the room.

"Papa's home!" the slightly larger one cried.

"Did you blow away any Scuzzballs, Papa?" asked the smaller one.

"Where did you get that kind of talk?" Diaz said. "You guys are watching too much TV." He knelt and took the squirming boys into his arms. "Why aren't you guys in bed, anyway?"

"We were, but we waited for you to tell us good night. Mama said we could."

"Okay, so good night," Diaz said with mock severity. "Now get in there and get to sleep or I'll have to exert some parental authority."

Giggling, the boys raced back out toward their bedroom.

Diaz looked at his wife and shook his head. "Scuzzballs. We've got to do something about their language."

"Isn't that what you call the bad guys down at the station? "

"I couldn't repeat what we call them," Diaz said, smiling. "You'd faint."

"Hah! That'll be the day. Go clean up. I'll make your sandwich."

Diaz went into the bedroom to use the extension phone. He dug out his notebook and dialed the number he'd copied off Kettering's phone. The line buzzed four times at the other end and there was an electronic click.

"This is Kettering. I can't come to the phone right now. If you have a message, deliver it after the beep. If you're trying to sell me something, forget it."

After several seconds of tape hiss, the beep signal sounded in Diaz's earpiece.

"Bri, if you're there, pick-up ... Okay, then, give me a call when you can. I found out something today that could be important."

He cradled the phone and sat looking at it a minute before he got up and went into the bathroom.

When he came out of the shower Michi had a grilled-cheese sandwich with a kosher dill pickle and a cold Bohemia waiting for him in the little breakfast alcove. She sat quietly across from him as he ate in silence.

"I guess it's nothing you want to tell me about," she said. "This business you're doing for Brian."

"Not just yet," he said. "It has to do with his boy. There may be something more going on here than Brian knows about, but I don't want to make any wild claims before I'm sure. I'll tell you all about it when I can."

"I know you will," she said.

They went to bed. Diaz lay next to the slim naked body of his wife, holding her close, feeling the tension of the day pull his muscles taut. Michi turned him over onto his stomach and began working on him with her strong, gentle hands. Gradually the worries that tugged at his consciousness were eased away.

"You're good," he murmured into the pillow. "You ever think of

doing this professionally?"

"Not a bad idea," she said. "While you're out chasing crooks, I could make a few dollars."

"Over my dead body."

She finished the massage with a sharp smack across his buttocks.

"Come here," he said, and rolled over onto his back to pull Michi on top of him.

"What's that?" she said.

"If you don't know after all these years - "

"No, I heard something. Outside."

Diaz eased her off of him and sat up. He tilted his head to listen.

Night sounds.

Crickets, tree frogs, a dog barking far away. Faint traffic noise from the freeway, half a mile distant.

"I don't - " he began.

"Ssshh. Listen."

He listened.

He heard it. A soft *shuffle, thump* that did not belong with the night sounds. Again, *shuffle, thump.*

Diaz swung his legs out of the bed. He padded silently across the carpet to the window that looked out on the patch of lawn and laurel hedge between his house and George Nolan's next door. He eased aside the heavy curtain and peered out.

A three-quarter moon threw a pale silvery light on the lawn in patches that were shot through with inky shadows. Nothing moved. Everything normal. He started to let the curtain drop back into place.

No, wait ... a movement by the hedge. A chunk of shadow detached itself from the deeper darkness and stood apart. Big, something like a man. The shoulders were high, the arms long and loose. It was only a dark silhouette, but Al Diaz had a sense of hot red eyes staring into his soul.

"Is something out there?" Michi said from the bed in a taut whisper.

"I'm not sure."

Moving carefully across the darkened room, Diaz found his robe on the peg inside the bathroom door. He pulled it on and gathered his short-barreled Chief's Special from the top dresser drawer.

"Al, don't go out there."

Diaz stopped and came back to the bed. Michi was sitting up with the sheet held to her chest. Her eyes glistened in the faint moonlight that sliced in through a crack in the curtains.

"It's probably nothing," he said.

"Please don't go out there."

Never in all the years of their marriage had she ever questioned the kind of work he did or his decisions in family matters. She saw him off in the morning and welcomed him home at night just as though he had a normal job in an office or factory. Sure, she worried about him, all cops' wives do, but she'd never let him know it.

Now fear showed clearly in her eyes.

He said, "I've got to."

"I have this feeling," she said. "You shouldn't go."

"I'll be right back. You stay here and stay quiet."

He touched the back of her neck, feeling the tightened cords there. Then he took his hand away and moved silently toward the door.

He padded softly through the house to the kitchen, leaving the

lights off. He stopped just inside the back door, holding his breath, listening. No sound came through the door that did not belong. He exhaled and stepped into the backyard.

The grass was cool and wet under his bare feet. Part of his mind registered the thought that he'd better get the mower out this weekend. Staying close to the wall, he moved around to the side of the house that the bedroom window was on. Cautiously he left the shelter of the house and crossed the lawn toward the laurel hedge. He held the Chief's Special pointed at the sky.

Something was wrong out here. It took him a minute to detect what it was. The silence was too deep. The night sounds were gone. The crickets and tree frogs had chopped their serenade. The far-off dog had ceased his barking, and for the moment no car traveled the freeway. The absolute quiet was oppressive.

Diaz concentrated on controlling his breathing. *In,* two, three, four ... *out,* two, three, four.

Nothing moved out here, nothing made a sound. Yet he was not alone. He knew it. The smell, that was it. Mingled with the tang of grass and the lemon from Nolan's front-yard tree there was something else. Something foul from the grave, or worse.

And it was cold. Al Diaz shuddered in the seventy-degree warmth of the California night. This one time maybe he should have listened to Michi's intuition. Maybe he should have stayed inside with her. Out here was something very, very wrong.

He had actually taken one backward step toward the door when he saw it. The thing moved out from the shelter of the hedge and came toward him. Seven feet tall, at least. Strangely shaped head. The arms reached for him. Thick, curving claws glinted at the end of twisted fingers. And the face ... oh, shit!

"Hold it right there!" Diaz cried. He leveled his gun at the center of the intruder's chest. His voice came out flat, without resonance, as though spoken through a thick wall of cotton.

The dark figure came on. Diaz could see the eyes now. Smoldering a

dark, angry red, like barbecue coals at night.

"Freeze," Diaz shouted.

The thing came on. He could hear its breath now, a deep, ragged rumble. The hands reached for him.

He squeezed the trigger. Even as the .38 slug exploded from the muzzle, he thought, *What the hell am I doing?* In these days where every expended bullet had to be accounted for with an accompanying report, you simply did not shoot unless you were damn sure of your target.

The slug made impact right at the breast bone, or where the breast bone should have been. The hollow point should have flattened to the size of a quarter, distributing the shock throughout the body in sufficient force to knock a big man down, or stagger him at the very least. This one did not even flinch.

Diaz got off three more rounds before the thing reached him.

One hand with fingers like spring steel gripped his shoulder. The talon sliced through the terry-cloth robe, punctured the skin, sank through muscle and bone and tendon in a hellish unbreakable grip.

The pain was like nothing Al Diaz had known. Once, as a rookie, he had taken a knife in the small of his back, perforating a kidney. That hurt bad enough to make the world flash red in his eyes, but it did not compare to the agony of his shoulder where the claws gripped him.

The gun dropped from his numb fingers. He felt the creature's other hand clamp down on the top of his head like some murderous starfish. The grip tightened just enough for the talons to break the flesh and hold him immobile.

Diaz worked his jaw, trying to bring up some sound. Nothing came out but a ragged hiss of air from his tortured lungs. He felt the red worms of blood slice down his face from the puncture wounds.

Slowly, slowly, the thing began to turn his head to the right. The steel grip on his shoulder held Diaz's body immobile while the other

hand slowly twisted his head.

He could make a sound now - a thin piping squeal from his straining vocal cords as his head was forced to a ninety-degree angle from straight ahead. Then farther. And farther yet.

The sternocleidomastoid muscle that stretched from behind the ear down to the collarbone was the first to tear. Then the platysma from the jaw to the shoulder. Thin gasps bubbled out of Diaz's throat as his air passage was twisted and crimped. The sounds he made were too soft to be heard over the grinding crackle of tendon and bones.

Diaz's mouth gaped in a silent scream as his face was forced around backwards. Mercifully, Alberto Diaz's spinal cord separated then between the second and third cervical vertebrae and he lost all sense of feeling. A moist clicking sound came from his tortured throat, and his muscles jerked in a death dance.

The body was allowed to fall to the grass chest forward, arms outflung. Diaz's unseeing eyes looked backwards, straight up into the night sky.

Chapter 17

It was three o'clock in the morning when Kettering dragged himself up the outside stairs to his one-room apartment. Three o'clock - the dark night of the soul.

Kettering was discouraged and he was tired as death. Tired because flying always tired him; there was no way he could get comfortable in those cramped airline coach seats. Discouraged because the trip to Prescott had added essentially nothing to his small store of information, unless he could count the fact that Jessie's child had been called Dorcas. Crazy name. No help at all.

Somehow, mysteriously, records had been lost or destroyed and people's memories clouded to leave no traceable record of the child or what became of him. Coincidence? Not very damn likely. Somebody ... something was orchestrating the disappearance of the kid.

He keyed open the door off the third-floor landing and walked into his single room. It looked small and lonely and cold. It smelled of stale cigarette smoke. It was home.

The tiny red eye of his answering machine blinked at him from the telephone table. Kettering decided it could wait. He grabbed a cold Coors from the fridge, popped it open and took deep, grateful swallows. Out of long habit he looked around for the friendly old recliner. Then he remembered he didn't have it anymore. It was part of another life.

He carried the beer over to the telephone table, cycled the answering machine to PLAYBACK MESSAGES, and rewound the tape. The machine gave him a chipmunk chatter of speeded-up, backward voices and beeps.

There had been a time when Kettering hated these machines. Whenever he encountered the self-conscious greeting: *"Hi, I'm not home right now, but you can leave your name ..."* and then the annoying electronic beep, he was tempted to tell the disembodied voice to go fuck itself and slam down the receiver. Usually he withheld comment and simply hung up. It took a long time before he felt comfortable talking to a machine.

When Mavis started to spend more time away from home, he was persuaded, reluctantly, that the family needed one. Before long, as with most of the high-tech gadgets he resisted at first, Kettering wondered how he ever got along without it.

Now he listened to the playback of a couple of hang ups. That would be the salesmen and wrong numbers and people who had nothing to say. No loss there.

He sat forward at the sound of Charity Moline's voice.

"Hi, big fella. It's eight o'clock. I'm sitting here alone trying to read some stupid book about why women love men who don't love them back. I'd lots rather be with you. I miss you, dam it. If you feel like it, give me a call when you get in. Don't worry about waking me up. Anyway, I'm eager to know what you found out in Prescott. Besides, I miss you. Whoa, I already said that, didn't I? Mustn't get you overconfident. Talk to you later. Bye."

Kettering smiled. He started to shut off the machine and call her, but decided he might as well hear the rest of his messages, if any.

Another hang up, then Al Diaz's voice.

"Bri, if you're there, pick up ..." A pause. *"Okay, then, give me a call when you can. I found out something today that could be important."*

Kettering stopped smiling. Something in his partner's tone snapped him wide awake. He rewound the tape and played Diaz's message again.

Something important. Diaz wouldn't screw around. If he said important, you could bet your ass it was. Kettering checked his

watch again. Three-fifteen. He forgot all about calling Charity Moline. That could wait. If Diaz had something, it was worth waking him up for. He dialed his partner's number.

"Hello." A voice Kettering did not recognize.

"Who's this?" A dumb question, he realized as soon as he said it.

"Who are you calling?" Decidedly unfriendly.

"Is this 555-0226?"

"That's right. Who is this?"

"I'm calling Al Diaz."

"He's unavailable. Who's calling?"

In the background Kettering could hear a faint keening sound. A cold hand clamped his throat as he recognized the sounds of crisis on the other end of the line.

"This is Detective Sergeant Brian Kettering, badge number 256. What's going on?"

The voice on the other end relaxed. "Oh, hello, Sergeant. This is Jim Orkney. We've got some bad business here."

Kettering recognized the name of the young officer. "What happened?"

"Somebody did Al Diaz."

"How bad?"

"Real bad."

"He's dead?"

"'Fraid so."

"How?"

A pause. "Looks like a broken neck."

"Jesus. Not an accident?"

"No way."

"Anybody in custody?"

"Not so far."

"Witnesses?"

"Negative."

"Wife and kids?"

"They're okay."

"Who's in charge there?"

"Sergeant Youngman. Lieutenant Ivory's on his way over."

"Tell Youngman I'm coming," Kettering said.

He dropped the phone into the cradle, left the half-finished beer beside it, and ran out the door.

***

The drive from Kettering's new apartment to Al Diaz's house on the east end of the Valley would take about twenty minutes in normal daytime traffic. With nobody else on the road it was possible in ten. Kettering made it in five.

The scene was garishly lit with floodlights and the rotating red and blue flashers on the roofs of two West Valley Police cars. Also on the scene was the coroner's ambulance and one of the department's unmarked Plymouths. He was relieved to see no reporters or television paraphernalia. Apparently, news that broke at three A.M. would have to get by without live media coverage.

Kettering jammed the Camaro to a stop behind the coroner's van and jumped out. He flashed his shield at the uniformed officer who

approached him.

"You Orkney?"

The young policeman took the time to look at Kettering's badge, then relaxed. "You beat the lieutenant here."

"Good. Where's Al?"

Orkney hesitated. "He, uh, was your partner, wasn't he?"

"That's right. Where is he?"

"Around the side of the house. It's pretty bad, Sergeant."

"I've seen bad before. Show me."

Orkney led him around between Diaz's house and the neighbor's. Al Diaz lay on the lawn he would never mow again, halfway between the house and the tall laurel hedge that marked the edge of his property. Another uniformed cop and a couple of night-shift detectives stood around the body while Wilson Buckner, a young black man from the coroner's office, knelt beside it.

Kettering walked over and looked down at his dead partner and friend. The night turned colder. The back of Al's white terry-cloth robe was stained red and there were four dark holes. The detective's arms were outflung, palms down on the grass. His feet were bare.

Finally Kettering looked at what he did not want to see. The face. The eyes were open and bulging. Tiny blood vessels had popped in the corneas. The eyes had no business looking up the way they were while Diaz's body lay on its stomach. The mouth gaped. The tongue lay pale and swollen against the lower lip. Diaz's healthy brown complexion was a sallow green under the floodlights.

"Oh, shit," Kettering said.

Buckner looked up at him. He had not been in the business long enough to act casual in the presence of violent death. His eyes showed an inner pain and sensitivity that would either die or eventually make him unfit for the job.

"First one like this I've ever seen," he said.

"What happened?" Kettering kept his voice level and his jaw tight.

"Near as I can tell without getting him on the table, is somebody held him by the shoulder and twisted his head around backwards. The massive discoloration around the neck means there's heavy tissue damage internally." Buckner's emotions forced him out of the medical jargon. "Motherfucker crushed the guy's larynx and broke his neck. Probably snapped the spinal cord too."

"Could one man do that?"

"In my opinion, no. A big strong man could do it to a weak little boy, maybe, or a frail woman. But this guy was in top physical shape. You can see where something clamped onto him by the wounds on his shoulders."

"What makes wounds like that?"

"Claws." Then quickly Buckner added, "Damned if I know," to show he was not seriously considering that.

"Ugly," Kettering said. Instinctively his eyes ranged over the scene, the house, the floodlit lawn, the hedge with its shadowy recesses. Nothing was there that did not belong, but in his mind he saw a tall, hunch-shouldered figure with long, taloned arms.

"Better believe it," said Buckner. "There's also scratches on his face and around the top of his head where he was grabbed. Ugly is the word." He stood up and brushed off his pants. "He was your partner, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. He was my partner."

"Sorry."

"Everybody gets dead."

The young morgue assistant frowned, shook his head, and returned his attention to the body.

Kettering turned to Page Youngman, the night-shift detective who stood by, looking angry and oddly embarrassed, as though this was not the way a cop was supposed to die.

"Got any witnesses yet?"

"Nobody. This neighborhood goes to bed early. Nobody woke up."

"How'd it happen?"

"The wife heard something outside, Al came out for a look. Whatever it was, I guess he found it. He got his piece out, popped four caps. No sign he hit anything."

"Where's the wife?"

"Inside. Quinlan's with her."

Kettering nodded to the detective and the coroner's man and walked back to the house.

Michi Diaz sat on the couch in the living room between their two boys. She had an arm around each of them. The boys' faces were pale and tear-streaked, but they were not crying now. Officer Rose Quinlan, a freckled, competent cop, sat in another chair, which had been pulled close to the couch. Michi looked up when Kettering came in.

"Hi, Brian. I thought you were out of town."

"I just got back."

"Hell of a thing, isn't it?"

"Hell of a thing," he agreed.

The tiny woman put on a smile for her sons. The boys looked groggy and confused. Michi hugged them to her for a moment. "You guys ought to be in bed."

"How about some hot chocolate, boys?" said Rose Quinlan. To Michi: "You have hot chocolate?"

Michi put a hand to her forehead. "Yes, it's in the ... in the ..."

"I'll find it," said the policewoman. She took the one of the boys by each hand and led them out of the room toward the kitchen.

Michi tried to recapture the smile for Kettering, but her composure broke. With a small cry she jumped up from the couch and ran into his arms. He held the tiny wife of his partner and let her cry.

"What happened to him, Brian?" Michi said, not looking up. "Who did it? Why?"

"I can't answer any of those questions," Kettering said. "But I will."

Gradually Michi's sobs eased. She stepped back and looked up at Kettering with huge black eyes. "You'll get him, won't you, Brian?"

"I'll get him," he said. "You can count on it."

"When you do ... kill him."

Kettering let his eyes answer for him.

Michi drew in a deep breath and pressed her palms together as though in prayer. She closed her eyes, and when she reopened them, her face was composed. She smiled softly. "Can I get you something? Coffee? A beer?"

"No thanks," Kettering said. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll handle it," she said.

"You've got my new phone number?"

"Al has it ... had it."

He scribbled the number on the back of one of his cards and handed it to her. "Call me. Any time. For any reason."

"Thank you," she said. "I'd better see if they found the hot chocolate."

Kettering watched Michi straighten her back as she walked out of

the room, then turned and started for the door. Before he reached it, Lieutenant Ivory came in looking angry and still rumpled from sleep.

"What are you doing here, Kettering? You're on suspension."

"Al was my partner."

"Well ..." Ivory looked uncomfortable. "Don't interfere with the investigation."

"I was just leaving."

As Kettering started out the door, the lieutenant held him with a hand on the shoulder.

"Brian, I'm sorry. It's bad business when a cop goes down, it's worse when he's your partner. I wish there was something I could say."

"I know, Lieutenant."

"You'll be wanting to come back on duty, I guess."

"Pretty soon," Kettering said. "There are a couple of things I have to take care of first."

The lieutenant eyed him suspiciously. "What things? Brian, you're not going to go Dirty Harry on me? I can't have freelancers screwing up the investigation."

"Personal things, Lieutenant."

Ivory gave him a long look, squeezed his shoulder and let him pass.

Kettering walked back out across the well-tended lawn to the street. He made his way through the lights and the cops and the ambulance men to where his car was parked. He looked back toward his partner's house once, then got in and drove away.

Chapter 18

Kettering drove back from the neat little house where his partner lay dead to his new apartment. He made the return trip much more slowly than he had come. The sky in the east had lightened enough so he could see the dark outlines of the San Bernardino Mountains. It was a pretty sight, if anybody cared. Kettering did not.

His mind seethed and bubbled with plans unformed, action untaken, puzzles unsolved. His back teeth ached with the need to just *do* something. However, the rest of his body ached with weariness. His brain was mushy and unable to complete a thought.

His emotions said, *Kill somebody!*

His weary mind said, *Go home and go to bed, asshole.*

Kettering went home.

***

The tiny eye on his answering machine stared at him red and unblinking. At least there were no more bad-news phone calls preserved on audio tape to be spilled like poison into his ear. He yanked the phone jack out of the machine and dropped it to the floor like a thin, dead snake. There would now be no jangling interruption of his rest.

He stripped off his clothes and let them fall where he stood. Wearing only his shorts, he cranked the convertible sofa out into the bed position and fell into it.

Outside, in somebody's backyard, a rooster crowed. An automatic garage door rumbled up. A motorcycle revved. Sounds of the Valley coming awake.

Kettering slept.

***

He came to suddenly and with that disoriented feeling that makes the armpits tingle for a few seconds. The walls and the furniture in the room were vague and unfamiliar. The slice of the day that showed between the window curtains was gray and impersonal. It could be any time, any place.

Where the hell am I?

The watch on his wrist, which he hadn't bothered to remove, told him it was just short of noon. A huge crow settled on the railing of the stairway outside his door and screeched. A sound like broken glass on a blackboard.

Kettering remembered where he was and why. And he remembered Al Diaz lying on his stomach in the neatly mowed grass of his lawn and looking up with dead, bloodshot eyes. Kettering would have liked to go back to sleep, but he knew he could not.

He took a long hot shower to wash the stink of travel and death off his body and out of his hair. He scrubbed his teeth until his gums hurt. He dressed in a soft blue shirt and gray cotton pants.

In the kitchen he filled a pan with water, put it on one of the gas burners, and stood by impatiently waiting for it to boil. He used the water to make a cup of instant coffee that helped him feel a little better. Just a little. It also made him hungry.

Abruptly he remembered the phone call from Charity last night. The call he had forgotten and never answered after he heard the voice of his dead friend. *I miss you,* she had said. Well, damn it, he missed her too. Right now he could not think of anyone he would rather be with.

He dug her card out of his wallet and reached for the telephone. The line was dead. Remembering, he plugged the little jack into the side of the instrument. It rang.

Kettering snatched his hand hack as though the thing had struck at

him. It rang again. He picked it up.

"Hello."

"Bri? Are you all right?"

The sound of his wife's voice brought an unexpected tightening around the stomach muscles. An irrational cramp of guilt because he was about to call another woman? Ridiculous.

"I'm fine, Mavis."

"I've been calling all morning. Kept getting a busy signal."

"There was some trouble with the line," he said.

"Bri, I ... I'm really sorry about Al."

"You heard?"

"Lieutenant Ivory called me. It was on the news this morning too."

"Oh, great. With pictures?"

"I don't know I just heard it on the radio."

"Yeah, well, cops die."

There was a moment's silence on the line. Kettering heard his wife's familiar little sigh of exasperation.

"I hate it when you do that John Wayne thing," she said. "I know how close you and Al were, and I can guess how you must be feeling now. Why don't you let it out for once?"

"Mavis, this is a lousy time to get into that old argument."

"Right. I'm sorry. I'm not thinking too clearly. So. How's the new place?"

"Livable."

"Are you going to stay there?"

"I don't know. For now."

"I see."

There was an uncomfortable space where neither of them spoke. Finally Mavis said, "I'm sorry about us too, Bri."

"Yeah, well, things don't always work out the way we want them to."

He could hear her draw a deep breath on the other end of the line. "Things weren't working with us for a long time. We both know that."

"So it seems."

"It was bad long before ... before the other night."

"Sure. So are you moving in with the Wister woman?"

"Yes."

The single syllable hit him like a fist in the gut. He had thought he was being sarcastic.

"I know what you're probably thinking," she went on. "I can guess the names you want to call me. But it doesn't matter anymore."

"Do I have to hear this now?" he said.

"You'll have to hear it sometime. I'm not asking you to understand or forgive, or anything like that. I just want you to hear me. I've found something with Gabrielle that I never thought I would have. And I don't intend to lose it."

"Uh-huh." It was all Kettering could manage with his throat all tightened up and the taste of bile in his mouth.

"We'll talk about it later. When you're ready. There are arrangements we'll have to make about the house and the furniture, but for now I'm just going to close it up. Is there anything you want?"

"My chair."

A faint, familiar smile edged her voice. "I figured that. I've already arranged to have it delivered to you."

Kettering closed his eyes and swallowed a couple of times. "Thanks."

"C.O.D., of course."

"Of course."

"Well, Bri, I guess that's it."

"I guess so."

"I really am sorry about Al. Do you think I should call Michi?"

"I think she'd appreciate it."

"There's one more problem I have to bother you about, then I'll leave you alone."

"Let's hear it."

"Trevor. He didn't come home last night."

"It's not the first time, is it?"

"Well, no, but considering the way things are with you and me, I thought he'd want to stay around."

"Where did he go?"

"Where he's been hanging out lately. The Pit."

"He's working there, isn't he?"

"Yes, but not all night. He's always come home."

"Did you call his friends?"

"The ones I know haven't seen him for weeks. He's been running with a new crowd. People he's met at The Pit. And I don't know any

of them."

"I'll look into it."

"Thanks. Call me if you learn anything."

"Sure. You'll be at ..." He couldn't get it out.

"At Gabrielle's. Do you have her number?"

"I've got it."

"Well ... all right, then. Talk to you later."

"See you."

With that exchange of banalities they hung up. Closing the book on nineteen years of marriage. To Kettering it seemed disappointingly flat. There should be shouting, recriminations, tears, shouldn't there?

He sat next to the silent telephone, absently wiping the palm of his hand against his pants leg. Outside the sky was leaden. It was starting off to be another bad, bad day.

Enough moping, he decided, and dialed Charity Moline's number.

She answered on the first ring, her voice low, eager, anxious.

"Hi," he said.

"Brian. Thank goodness. I tried to call but got a busy signal all morning. What did you do, unplug your phone?"

"Yeah."

"You sound down. Bad news?"

"Bad. Al Diaz got killed last night."

"Oh no. What happened?"

"Somebody ... something twisted his head around backwards."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Charity. "Brian, I'm sorry. You two were pretty close, weren't you?"

"Yeah." He shifted the subject along with the tone of his voice. "You hungry?"

"I can always eat."

"You don't look it."

"A lucky metabolism. I have a Godzillian appetite."

"I'll pick you up in half an hour."

"Did you learn anything on the trip back to Indiana?"

"I'll tell you about it over lunch."

***

Charity was waiting for him when he pulled up in front of her funky cottage in the hills behind Hollywood. She wore a full flowered skirt and a scoop-neck blouse, and hardly any makeup. She looked like a high school girl. Well, not one of today's high school girls, Kettering amended. That one would have half her head shaved and the other half moussed into spikes and be wearing a black leather mini over spandex tights. He preferred the way Charity Moline looked.

They went for lunch to one of the ubiquitous Mexican restaurants around Los Angeles where the busboys kept a watchful eye on the door for immigration officers. They ordered combination plates including refried beans, Spanish rice, enchiladas, and chili rellenos - L.A.-style Mexican food such as you would never find in Mexico. Kettering drenched his plate with fiery red salsa and ordered two bottles of Bohemia, an authentic Mexican beer that came with frosty cold mugs.

"So Indiana was a bust," Charity said when Kettering had given her his appraisal of the trip.

"Thanks to a lot of very peculiar circumstances, the trail of my sister

Jessie's child ends when he was sixteen or so and his foster parents were murdered."

"Do you think he had something to do with their death?"

"I'd bet on it. Remember, this is no ordinary child."

"That's a fact."

"My guess is that the foster parents somehow found out what he really was, and to keep the secret, he killed them."

Charity was silent for a moment while she cleaned her plate. Finally she looked across the table at him and said, "Brian, *what*, exactly, do you think he was?"

Kettering finished his beer and signaled the waiter for two more. "What can I tell you? He was conceived under weird circumstances. I was just a little kid when I watched the business out in that field with my sister and the Greasers, but even then I knew something was happening that was not part of the normal world. Then his birth was bizarre, coming in an alley the way it did and leaving my sister beaten up and catatonic."

He fell silent while the waiter delivered fresh bottles of Bohemia. "Then there was the accident that killed my mother and knocked me into the twilight zone. I don't believe it was an accident."

Charity's eyes were bright, watching him.

"And you think all this is tied to your personal childhood boogeyman ... the Doomstalker."

"Wasn't it you who came up with the theory first?"

"Uh-huh, but I'm trying to be rational about it now. I told you I'm willing to believe that the Doomstalker exists. And the circumstantial evidence suggests that it could be Jessie's child. Do we have any kind of proof?"

"No proof, but I don't even care. I'm convinced that whatever the Doomstalker is, it's not human, but it can live in human form. It

lives in that kid right now." He corrected himself. "No, not a kid, he'd be thirty years old. He's found me now, and he's taking some kind of crazy revenge by messing up my family, killing my friends. I've got to put an end to it."

"How?"

"There's the rub. I'm damned if I know how. I know only that I've got to do it."

The waiter came by and delivered the check. Kettering swallowed the last of his second beer.

"I did some checking of my own while you were gone," Charity said.

"Oh?"

"When Al Diaz stopped by your place he told you about this Enzo DuLac who runs The Pit."

"Yeah. That's where my kid's been hanging out lately. My wife is worried."

"She's got reason to worry. This DuLac is not a very nice man. I traced him back to San Francisco in the late seventies. He did some street hustling up there and pimping for tourists and locals who wanted young amateur flesh."

"Where did you get all that?"

"Hey, I'm a reporter, remember? He was just warming up in San Francisco. Came to L.A. eight years ago. Got into and out of massage parlors, nude photography cribs, porno bookstores, and coed mud wrestling."

"Enterprising fella," Kettering said.

"He moved in as manager of The Pit a year ago, and suddenly he's in the big time."

"Al told me the guy is a sleaze."

"World-class."

"Who's bankrolling him?"

"That I couldn't find out."

"I'll drop in on his operation tonight. I'd really like to know where he was when Al Diaz got his neck wrung."

"Do you think DuLac ... ?" She left the question hanging.

Kettering was thoughtful for a moment. "Al told me he was thirty ..."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"Couldn't if I wanted to. I'm on suspension."

"Then I'll go with you," Charity said.

"No way."

Her jaw tightened and her eyes flashed at him. "What's this 'no way' bullshit?"

"This isn't your business."

"There could be a hell of a story here, Kettering. That *is* my business."

"Not tonight."

"Yes, tonight. I'm going along."

"It may get ugly."

"Oh, and you want to protect the delicate little female, is that it? Well, hear this, mister, I am no wimpy broad to be left home wringing my hands while you go out and beat up the bad guys. I'm going with you."

"No you're not." Kettering's voice was hard and final. "I do this alone."

Charity glared across the empty plates at him for several seconds. Abruptly she slapped the tabletop and stood up. "Fine. Go do your macho thing. For all I care, you can start doing a few other things alone too."

And with that exit line she was gone.

Kettering peeled bills from his money clip and laid them in the little plastic tray with the check. He gave Charity time to walk out into the parking lot and cool down.

When he followed after a couple of minutes, she was nowhere in sight. The restaurant was too far from her place for her to walk home, and public transportation in Los Angeles being what it was, she hadn't grabbed a bus. She might have called a taxi, or in her present mood even hitchhiked. Whatever, she was gone.

Kettering climbed into his car and sat drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, keenly feeling the loss. He reflected sourly that this was not his day for dealing with women. After a while he started the engine and drove off.

Chapter 19

When he was absolutely sure Charity Moline was not coming back, Kettering drove out of the Mexican restaurant parking lot and headed home. The bachelor apartment, which had seemed as good a place as any to sleep and hang his clothes, was suddenly cramped and depressing. Charity had somehow made it cozy and comfortable. Now she was gone.

The answering machine blinked its red-eye summons. The message this time was from Lieutenant Ivory: *"I want to see you. Call me when you get in."* Kettering was not anxious to talk to the lieutenant, but right now any excuse to get out of the apartment would do. He passed up the telephone and went back outside.

The Camaro was still warm when he got in and drove away. He concentrated on glowering at other drivers during his trip to the Police Building so he wouldn't have to think about Al Diaz and Mavis and Charity Moline and the Doomstalker.

***

Lieutenant Ivory came around the desk to meet Kettering when he walked in. He got right to the point. "Brian, I didn't like the way you looked when you left Al Diaz's place last night."

"A man's partner gets killed, a man isn't supposed to look like a game-show winner."

"That isn't what I mean. You looked like you knew something I didn't know about Al's death. Something you weren't sharing with me and the rest of the department."

"Not likely, Lieutenant. How much does the department know?"

"Just the cause of death - severed spinal cord, massive injuries to neck and throat. And the approximate time: three A.M."

"That's not very much."

"Can you add anything to it?"

"Believe me, Lieutenant, I would if I could."

"You're not thinking of working on this on your own, I hope."

"That would be pretty stupid."

"My thought exactly." Ivory wiped a hand over his face as though clearing away cobwebs. "Brian, I know this has hit you hard. It's hit all of us. We'll get the sonofabitch who did it. You know we will. And you know every man here is hoping the fucker will put up a fight. We all know this suspension of yours is just a procedural matter, but it does mean you're not working. Leave this to the department, will you?"

"If you had any leads, would you tell me?" Kettering asked.

"Probably not. But the sorry fact is, we don't. I wish we did."

Kettering walked to the window. He looked out at the deceptively peaceful vista of sunlit green lawn, palm trees, casual strollers. "Who kills like that, Nathan? Who twists a man's head around backwards?"

"I can't answer that."

"The media ghouls are going to have fun with it."

"Not all that much. All we gave them was 'unknown causes.' If they want more, they can fucking dig for it."

"Don't think they won't."

Ivory shrugged. "First Amendment."

"Sure. Was there anything else, Lieutenant?"

"A little advice. Why don't you use your time off to take a trip? Leave town. Go fishing. Get laid."

Kettering shook his head. "I think I'll stick around and see what happens."

Lieutenant Ivory walked back behind the desk and eased into the chair. He faced Kettering. His eyes were cold. "Stay out of our way, Sergeant. You can't do anybody any good going free-lance."

"Gotcha, Lieutenant," Kettering said.

The two men's eyes locked for a moment, then Kettering left the office.

***

Even after the Mexican lunch with Charity, Kettering was hungry again. Nerves did that to him sometimes. He pulled into a Burger King and bought a double-cheese Whopper, an order of fries, and a strawberry shake. He ate them in his car, listening to a call-in talk show on the radio where some bleeding heart with an English accent prattled on about how cruel the death penalty is.

"Easy for you to say, pussy," Kettering muttered at the radio. "Wait till one of your own gets it in the streets. You'll be howling for blood then."

He chewed the burger slowly, trying to make the meal last.

When he swallowed the last of the shake it was still too early to roust Enzo DuLac at The Pit. He did not want to return to the depressing apartment alone, so he picked out a movie, one of those multiplex shoeboxes in a shopping mall, bought a ticket, and went in to join a handful of others with nothing better to do in the late afternoon.

He sat through a movie about the standard pair of Hollywood cops - one black, one white; one a free spirit, one by-the-book. In the course of the movie they blew away half the population of their unnamed city, rescued each other and the female star, and managed to lose their shirts often enough to display their pumped-up

musculature. Kettering slouched in his seat and thought about other things.

When he came out of the theater after sitting through the cop movie twice, it was dark. There was a chill in the air and hookers on the street. Time to go to work.

***

When Kettering had first come to California, the club had been called Lembo's and featured some pretty good jazz, mostly local talent, but a few nationally known groups. The owner, a one-time sax player with Stan Kenton, had kept the place going long after it ceased to earn the rent. Finally, with the changing demographics of the neighborhood and the evolution of musical tastes, he gave up and sold the place. In the intervening years it had been Glitz, a disco; The Corral, a country-western bar; Playtime, a singles meat market; and currently, The Pit, a heavy-metal rock joint.

Kettering parked across the street and smoked two Marlboros as he watched the entrance, a chicken-wire-and-plaster mock-up of a cave. A sign above it read: ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Peculiar sense of humor, Kettering thought. Or maybe it was not meant to be funny.

A steady stream of young customers flowed out of their cars and into the club. It was the middle of the week, and the crowd would not approach the weekend mob scenes, but Enzo DuLac was obviously not hurting for business.

Kettering judged the age range to be from eighteen to maybe twenty-five, with a few older and a few younger. It was hard to nail down the ages, given the crazy costumes and wildly inventive hair styles and makeup. Nothing, Kettering observed, could make you feel old faster than watching the passing fashion fads of the young.

With a heavy sigh he flipped his last cigarette into the night, got out of the car, and lumbered across to the cavelike entrance to The Pit.

The noise spilled out from inside like a solid mass. Kettering clamped his teeth together, hoping he would not blow out an eardrum, and pushed forward. Just beyond the cave entrance a blond hunk in a Pink Floyd T-shirt and single dangling earring stepped in front of him. He put his mouth close to Kettering's ear to be heard.

"Can I help you?"

Kettering looked at the burly youth and looked past him. "I don't think so," he shouted back.

He stepped to one side to pass, the hunk moved with him. The record ended and there was a sudden relative silence.

"Looking for somebody?"

"I'll let you know."

When he started past again, the blond youth put a restraining hand on his arm. Kettering looked down at the heavy-knuckled hand and up into the pale blue eyes.

"Get that off my sleeve."

The blue eyes blinked. "Are you sure you're in the right place, mister?"

"That's what I'm going to find out. Now let go of my jacket before I break your hand off at the wrist."

Kettering had always wanted to talk that way to a tough guy. He felt like Clint Eastwood, and he half hoped the youth would provide an excuse to belt him. *Make my day.* Most likely the punk could take him, but Kettering did not give a damn.

The blond youth spent five seconds thinking it over, decided not to challenge the mean-looking older man. He removed his hand and dusted an imaginary lint speck from Kettering's sleeve. "Just doing my job."

"Keep up the good work."

The music exploded again and Kettering barged on.

The interior of the club carried out in a tacky way the motif of the entrance - a sort of soft-focus version of Hell. The walls were cheaply plastered in irregular rock shapes with niches and nooks wherein lurked grinning devils' heads. Red lights brightened and dimmed in rhythm with the ear-splitting music that blasted from multiple huge speakers. Laser beams stabbed through the murk at irregular intervals. At a stage in the center of the dance floor a black disk jockey in a black tank top gyrated to the sounds of the records he was playing.

Kettering pushed his way through the leathered and moussed crowd of dancers to the bar. The air was heavy with the smell of bodies and perfume. The oppressive atmosphere closed in, making Kettering long for the fresh air outside. He pressed on. The bar was separated from the rest of the club by a wooden railing. A hard-eyed Mexican stood at the gate eyeballing the IDs of young customers. Kettering shoved his way past.

In the bar Kettering was relieved to find that acoustic paneling slightly lowered the decibel level. At a glance he judged the other customers to be legitimately old enough to drink. DuLac was not stupid enough to get the Mothers Against Drunk Driving on his case.

A girl with enormous breasts spilling out of her tight uniform leaned toward him across the bar. "What'll you have, big guy?"

"Enzo DuLac."

She batted her heavy eyelashes. "We don't do trick drinks. Whiskey and Seven, gin and tonic, that kind of stuff. Or a beer."

"Enzo DuLac," Kettering repeated. "He's your boss. I want to talk to him."

A tall, painfully thin young man with a vanishing hairline sidled over next to the heavy-breasted barmaid. "Problem here, Cindi?"

Cindi retreated with an uncertain smile. The man looked Kettering

over.

"Help you?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Steve, the bar manager."

"I want Enzo DuLac," Kettering said. "He's not a trick drink."

"Mr. DuLac doesn't like to come out front."

"How would Mr. DuLac like to have his place busted?"

"We run a clean operation here."

"Sure you do. What'll you bet I could find drug apparatus in your men's room?"

The bar manager smiled an oily smile. "I don't think there's much chance of that, Mister ..."

"Sergeant," Kettering told him, showing his teeth. It would play hell with him if Lieutenant Ivory found out, but he went ahead and flashed his badge. "If you can read that, skinny, you know I'm not bullshitting you. Now you go tell Mr. DuLac to move his ass out here unless he wants this place boarded up tomorrow."

The bar manager swallowed, his Adam's apple riding up and down like it was on a rubber band. Kettering was beginning to enjoy himself.

"I'll buzz him." The man reached under the bar and pushed something out of Kettering's sight, then stood shifting his weight and looking nervously toward the far end of the bar, where a crimson velvet curtain concealed whatever lay behind it.

After a minute a small man with narrow shoulders, greased-back hair, and heavy black eyebrows came through the curtain. He walked over to the bar, nodded at the manager, who hurried off to join Cindi, and faced Kettering.

"I'm Enzo DuLac. Do we have a problem?"

"I'm Detective Sergeant Kettering, and that's what I want to find out."

"Who sent you here?"

"Nobody sent me. I'm here on business of my own."

"And what might that be?"

"My partner was Al Diaz."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Kettering showed him the teeth. "Think hard."

"Wait a minute, was that the Mexican cop?'"

"Keep thinking."

"Yeah, he was around here last night asking questions. Did you say he *was* your partner?"

"He got himself dead. I thought maybe you could tell me something about it."

Even here in the comparative shelter of the bar, the sound boomed and screamed from the giant speakers, making Kettering's jawbone vibrate.

"Maybe we better go to my office," DuLac shouted.

Kettering nodded.

DuLac led the way back to the crimson curtain and through a thick door that lay behind it. The door closed and the blasting music in the big room died mercifully, though the drumbeat still pulsed in the floor. The two men walked back along a dim hallway that smelled of urine. The walls were plastered with rock posters and scrawled with graffiti. A door at the end was marked PRIVATE.

DuLac knocked lightly, waited a moment, and opened the door.

Kettering started in, then stepped back. A woman rose from a couch at the far wall and walked toward him. Her hair was like pale smoke worn loose around a face that was sculpted for magazine covers. Her eyes, a strange silvery color, looked into his for less than a second, but the effect was like a fist to the solar plexus. For that split second, in Kettering's mind the bare office looked like Cleopatra's boudoir.

The woman was wearing something simple and black that moved with her like a part of her body. She was past the men and through the door and out of sight before Kettering could catch his breath. He stood foolishly looking at the doorway where she had gone.

"You want to tell me what the problem is?" DuLac said.

The spell was broken. The ratty office returned. Still, the essence of the woman lingered in the room. Kettering felt as though he had just stepped off the Colossus at Magic Mountain. He forced his attention back to the dark little man.

"You said you saw Detective Diaz yesterday?"

"I said he was here."

"All right," Kettering said wearily, "*did* you see him?"

"For about five minutes is all."

"What did you talk about?"

"He asked a bunch of questions, I told him it was none of his business. He went away. That's it."

"What questions?"

"Personal questions."

"Like?"

"I'm telling you what I told your partner. I don't have to answer anything."

Kettering sighed. He took his time and let his eyes walk over the little man. DuLac fingered a button on his Ultrasuede jacket. He sucked at his teeth. He shifted his feet.

Could this nervous little creep with the comic eyebrows be the deadly creature he was seeking? The thing that had fucked up his life and struck down his friend? Could Enzo DuLac be the personification of his nightmares ... the Doomstalker?

No way. It simply wouldn't play.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" the bar manager said finally.

"Where were you last night, DuLac?"

"Aren't you supposed to read me some rights?"

"Fuck your rights. Where were you?"

DuLac's eyes ping-ponged around the room. He shrugged, and seemed to grow even smaller. "Right here. This is where I work. Where else would I be?"

"What time were you here?"

"From nine till almost five A.M.."

"Why so late?"

"We're an after-hours club. We close the bar at two, but we stay open for the kids. Any law against that?"

"Anybody see you here during that time?"

DuLac's confidence began to grow as he sensed Kettering's frustration. "Only a hundred people or so. You want me to start calling them in?"

Kettering fought down an impulse to squash the little cockroach. It would be fun but pointless. After a few years in police work you had a pretty good idea when some asshole was finally telling the

truth. DuLac was telling the truth.

He said, "I'll find them if I need them."

Kettering started out the door.

"Wait a minute." DuLac, smirking like a winner, pulled a pad and a ballpoint pen from a desk drawer. He looked up. "I want to let a few people know about this visit. What did you say the name was, Sergeant?"

"Callahan. Harry Callahan."

Kettering slammed the office door, marched down the hallway, pushed his way into the ear-busting outer room, elbowed through the swarm of punky kids into the night. He felt like he'd come out of a toilet.

Chapter 20

Moving is not much fun under the best of circumstances. No matter how you look forward to the new home, you are always leaving a little of yourself at the old. Moving when it is part of a rotten situation like the breakup of a marriage is pure hell.

The headlight beams of the Honda picked out the familiar street, and Mavis Kettering drove in slowly. Until now she had lived her entire life, thirty-eight years, at just four addresses. She thought about the homes she had known as she drove past the secure, comfortable houses of her late neighbors and parked in front of her own.

The first was her parents' big old house in Columbus. She was still living there as a twenty-year-old part-time student at Ohio State and working for the district attorney at city hall when she met Brian Kettering. When they were married, their first home was the tiny apartment where he lived when he worked the graveyard shift on the Columbus Police Department.

Then came the move to California and half a duplex in North Hollywood. There, with Trevor growing like a weed, they finally had to admit they needed more room.

Then, eight years ago, they achieved what had seemed to Mavis to be the American dream - a three-bedroom California ranch-style tract home on a cul-de-sac in West Valley. Now she was leaving that one. Alone.

Four homes in thirty-eight years. In Southern California it was not uncommon for people to move that many times in a year. Mavis was from the midwest, where getting married meant settling down. Putting down roots.

Ironically, she thought, in the late 1980s, when even Californians were sinking roots, Mavis Kettering was yanking hers up. Not that she had any doubts about what she was doing. Any real marriage to Brian had ended long ago. They both knew it, even if they had never talked about it. Brian would go on without her much as he had when she was with him.

And it was clear that Trevor didn't need her. He was no more than an occasional visitor now. And with Gabrielle Wister she had discovered unsuspected resources in herself.

Had it been only a month since she and Gabrielle became ... close? Mavis had resisted her feelings at first, but the other woman seemed to exert some magical magnetic pull on her. When she casually lay a hand on Mavis's shoulder as she studied a piece of ceramic jewelry, it was all Mavis could do to keep from crying out. When, finally, she had admitted to herself and to Gabrielle what she felt, it was as though a dam burst inside her, loosing long-held emotions. Strange, she had never experienced anything like it with another woman, ever. Even now, when she was alone in the dark, sometimes she wondered ...

No, she told herself severely. This was the right thing to do. But that didn't mean it was easy.

She got out of the car and stood in front of the house that had been home for so many years. It was the only house on the street in which all the windows were dark. The morning paper lay unwrapped on the front stoop. She must remember to stop it. The house looked deserted already. Abandoned.

Mavis started up the walk toward the twin junipers that flanked the door. She pulled the sweater closer around her against a sudden chill.

At the door she paused to pass her fingers over the temporary patches that had been used to seal the bullet holes. Doing a crazy thing like that was not at all like Brian. He was meticulous in his care and use of firearms. Mavis was still unclear on what happened. What had he thought he was shooting at that night, anyway?

She would take some of the blame for the incident. It was, after all, the night he drove over and found her with Gabrielle. Any man might react violently to that. Brian had been remarkably controlled at the time. Or so it seemed.

Mavis had planned to tell him. She had discussed with Gabrielle how to go about it. But she kept putting it off. And when Brian found out the way he did, it was not without some relief that she accepted it.

She unlocked the door and went inside. The place smelled musty and stale. She sniffed the air. Her stomach lurched. Had something got inside and died here? That didn't make sense. The house had not been empty that long. Surely Trevor had been in since yesterday. She flipped the light switch. Nothing happened.

"Damn." Her voice sounded flat and muffled in the dark living room. Had the light bill been paid? Of course it had. A fuse, then. Or what did Brian tell her to call them? Circuit breakers. The box was out in the kitchen.

On the way through the living room she tried switching on a lamp. It too was dead, so a burned-out bulb was not the problem.

"Damn," she said again. Home repairs were a man's job. She winced at the thought, remembering there wasn't going to be a man in her new home. She was going to have to make some changes in her thinking.

She considered leaving and coming back in the morning. No, there were a few things she needed from the bedroom, and as long as she was here, she might as well take them. If fooling with the circuit breakers did not restore the lights, she thought there was a flashlight in Brian's tool drawer.

Mavis continued through the dining area, feeling her way, using the faint light that filtered in through the living room from the streetlamp outside. The kitchen doorway, a darker rectangle in the darkness, loomed ahead of her.

Schuss.

What was that? It sounded like something softly sliding across the kitchen floor.

Thump.

Faint, barely audible, but unmistakably coming from the next room.

"Trevor?" Her voice had gone all weak and quivery.

Silence.

"Is someone there?"

Schuss. Thump.

Slowly, carefully, trying very hard not to make a sound, Mavis backed away toward the front door.

Something jabbed her. She sucked in her breath and almost screamed before reaching back to feel the edge of the dining room table which she had backed into. Her feeling of relief evaporated instantly as something scraped on the other side of the door to the kitchen.

Mavis had never been easily frightened. When Trevor had gone through his horror-movie phase a few years ago and loaded up on rented gore videos, the blood and the monsters on the television screen had only bored her. After years of marriage to a policeman, she had known too much real-life horror to be chilled by anything concocted in a special-effects lab.

Now, though, she knew a sense of terror deeper than anything she could have imagined. Something was in her house. She knew that with a cold dreadful certainty. Something alive was in her house. Alive and deadly.

She edged, back around the table, taking care not to move the chairs and make noise. Part of her mind scoffed at the idea of being careful. Did she think whatever it was didn't know she was here? Ridiculous. It knew, all right.

It knew.

The, glow from the streetlamp outlined the curtained front window. Just to the left of the window would be the front door. Beyond it, safety. Mavis made her way toward the door across the deep wall-to-wall carpeting. How pleased she had been when Brian had agreed to put it in. Thick, camel-brown. Stain resistant. How little all that meant now. All she wanted was to cross that carpet and escape.

Step by hesitant step she moved toward the door.

Almost there now. Almost safe.

The lights came on.

Mavis gasped and threw her hands before her eyes as every bulb in the house suddenly blazed. She stumbled, caught herself on the back of a chair to keep from falling.

Still dazzled by the sudden brilliance, she turned back toward the kitchen. There, filling the doorway, shoulders hunched, long arms dangling, was the figure of a ... a man? No, not a man. Too large. Wrong shape.

What then?

The lights stabbed into Mavis's eyes, seared her brain. Was the thing in the kitchen doorway moving? Coming toward her?

Finally she let go the long-held scream. She whirled and ran stumbling toward the front door. Something was just behind her. Something that breathed in ragged half growls. The doorknob was slippery and cold under her touch, and it took precious seconds for her to claw it open.

Outside in the chill night she ran across the lawn to the little car and slammed herself inside. She refused to look back toward the house, not wanting to see what might be coming after her. Another interminable moment passed while she scrabbled the key from her bag, got it into the ignition, and finally started the engine.

With tears blurring her vision, Mavis fought the steering wheel, felt the tires bounce off the curb, and was at last on the street going

away. Away from her house and ... and ...

And what?

She eased up on the accelerator. With her free hand she fished a Kleenex from the dispenser under the dash panel and wiped her eyes. As the car slowed to a reasonable speed she gradually brought her breathing under control.

In the instant of panic she had thought: *Call the police!* Now she saw how ludicrous that scene would be.

You say someone is in your house, lady?

I saw ... something.

Yes, ma'am. And what, exactly was it you saw?

I don't know. First it was dark. Then it was all light. It hurt my eyes.

Yes, ma'am. It was dark, then it was light, and you saw what?

Good question. What had she seen, if anything? Half blinded as she was, how could she be sure?

There were the sounds from the kitchen. Yes, that was something. Darkness or light did not affect sounds.

I heard something.

Could you describe what you heard, ma'am?

Yes, it was a sort of sliding, shuffling, scraping bump. Something like that.

Yes, ma'am. We'll have a man come around and have a look.

Sure they would. She knew how the police handled crackpot calls. Promise the nut anything then forget it, hope she didn't call back.

But there *was* something in that house, dammit. Something evil. She could feel it. Sense it. She could smell it when she walked in. It was not something a desk officer in a police station would understand,

and she couldn't blame the man.

There was one person she could tell. Brian. In the years they had been married, she had seen him more than once sit straight up in bed, sweating, staring into the darkness. He was reluctant to talk about what he saw, the fears that chilled him. Probably thought it was unmanly. But once in a while he would talk to her. Brian sensed things that were out there in the night. He knew things that other people were afraid to admit. Brian would understand.

Mavis pulled to the side of the road and forced herself to relax. Her fingers were cramped into claw shapes from gripping the steering wheel. The muscles across the back of her shoulders were bunched and painful. She breathed deeply and slowly. Gradually the tension eased.

She concentrated and came up with the address Brian had given her. His new apartment. A doubt crept in. How would he react to seeing her in the middle of the night. Would he be annoyed? What if he had somebody with him? A woman?

What foolishness! Brian would act as he always had in times of crisis - strong, capable, reassuring.

Mavis realized fully what she was doing. Running at the first real emergency to the man she had abandoned. No, not *abandoned,* dammit. He was as much to blame as she, if blame had to be laid.

But thinking this way was pointless. She wanted to see Brian. Later she could feel embarrassed and she could explain or apologize or whatever. Now all she knew was that she wanted Brian.

She found the street where he lived and his old wood-frame apartment building among the newer cinder-block and stucco units. Parked cars lined both sides of the street. Mavis pulled into a red zone alongside a fire hydrant. The police sticker on her rear window still brought certain privileges.

She sat for a moment looking up at dark windows that would be his third-floor apartment. What if he weren't home? Or in there asleep? Again the image came to her of her husband in bed with another

woman. She should have stopped somewhere, phoned him.

Stopped and phoned?! Mavis expelled her breath in a little snort of exasperation. What possible difference would it make now? Get up there, she told herself, and talk to the man.

She left the security of her little car, closing the door reluctantly. The chill of the night closed around her. She walked swiftly along the sidewalk past one of the newer buildings that stood next to Brian's. From somewhere inside came salsa music and party sounds.

Brian's building was silent. It was the last of the older generation hanging on among the young ethnic mix of the neighborhood.

The wooden steps that zigzagged up the outside wall looked frail in the filtered moonlight. Mavis looked both ways on the street behind her, then quickly started up the stairs, holding onto the railing as she went. She paused at the second-floor landing and looked down over the street. No cars passed, no one strolled the sidewalks. The party music from next door was a faint tinkle. Clutching her sweater close around her, she hurried on up to the third floor.

The door that led to Brian's apartment had a window, but it was covered with a dark cotton print curtain. Ugly. Certainly not what she would have chosen.

God, what was she doing, redecorating for him?

She knocked, waited, knocked again.

Damn.

Please be here.

She knocked a third time, feeling empty.

Chuff.

A sound from inside the apartment. He was home. She let go a sigh of relief and knocked again.

Chuff.

Wait! The sound was not from inside. It came from the wooden stairs. Down there in the dark. Behind her.

Chuff.

Coming up. Coming toward her.

Chuff.

Brian coming home? Oh, please, dear God, let it be Brian coming home!

Chuff.

She turned.

Looked down.

Saw the face.

Screamed.

After that the faint party sounds from the building next door were all that disturbed the silence of the night.

Chapter 21

There had been other times in his life before this one when Brian Kettering had felt like an utter and complete asshole. Plenty of them. On none of those occasions, however, did he feel more utter and complete than on this warm California night as he drove away from his confrontation, if you could call it that, with Enzo DuLac at The Pit.

He had failed to connect the little sleaze in any way with the killing of Al Diaz. He had wanted so badly for DuLac to be guilty that it knocked the props out when the little shithead had come up with an alibi. Beyond the subject of Diaz's murder, he had not even thought of a way to bring up Trevor or any of the other shit that was plaguing him.

What made the whole fiasco even worse was that the oily little bastard had made a fool of him.

"Shit!" Kettering pounded the steering wheel as though it were the greasy top of Enzo DuLac's head. "Shit shit *shit*!"

When was this losing streak going to end? Kettering asked himself. He had fucked up at the department, his wife had moved in with another woman, his son was working at a pesthole. Charity Moline had walked out on him, and finally, he had come off second best against a lightweight like Enzo DuLac.

"Shit!"

There were, as usual, no parking places on the street where Kettering now lived. Overbuilt with apartments on both sides, there seemed to be cars permanently lining the curbs, as though they had grown there and sunk roots into the concrete.

He swung into a U-tum to reach his usual spot in the red zone next to the fire hydrant. What the hell? Kettering hit the brakes. A car was already parked there. A familiar little Honda. He eased forward and checked the license plate. It was Mavis's Honda, all right. What was she doing here? It had to be more bad news.

Kettering double-parked the Camaro and got out. He peered into the Honda. Empty.

He stepped back and shuddered as though a cold breath had blown on the back of his neck. Something was wrong.

He sprinted across the street to his old three-story building. A dark, indistinct mound lay at the bottom of the wooden stairs. An outflung hand, pale under the overhanging bulb, identified it as a body. After a quick scan of the area Kettering ran to the body and knelt beside it. He looked down into the pale, bruised face of his wife.

"No!" he cried to the unhearing night.

He felt her neck for a pulse. It was there. Weak and fluttery, but the pulse was there. She was alive; that was something. But the unnatural position of her limbs did not look good.

As gently as he could, Kettering arranged her in a more comfortable-looking position. Mavis's eyes did not open, She looked fragile and young lying there in her jeans and thin sweater.

He stripped off his coat and spread it across her upper body for warmth. Then he ran up the stairs, banged into his room and grabbed the telephone. He dragged it to the end of the cord so he could stand in the doorway to keep a watch on Mavis lying two flights down. He punched out the emergency number, 911.

If you put me on hold, I'll kill you.

His call was answered promptly. He was not put on hold.

He gave his name and the address. "Woman here, badly injured. Looks like a fall. Needs an ambulance."

The impersonal voice of 911 told him to remain at the scene; an ambulance would be there directly. Kettering dropped the phone into its cradle and ran back down the stairs.

He knelt again by Mavis's side and peered out toward the street, looking for the ambulance. That was dumb; it would take two or three minutes at best for it to get there.

His wife's face was pale and cold. The bruises showed in dark contrast. Kettering smoothed her hair and felt a sticky mass on one side of her head. He lifted the matted hair and saw a trickle of dark blood from her ear. Another bad sign.

"Don't die, Mavis," he said, unaware he was speaking aloud. "Please don't die on me."

Her eyes opened.

"Mavis, can you hear me?"

She looked up at him and beyond him, frowning, unfocused. "Bri?"

"I'm here."

"Is it gone?"

"What? Is what gone?"

"It was here, Bri. It came after me."

"Ssshhh. Don't try to talk. Help is coming."

She gave no sign that she had heard. "The thing from your dreams, Bri. The nightmare beast that you never wanted to tell me about."

"Hush," he said, feeling the cold breath again on the back of his neck.

Mavis rolled her head slowly from side to side. "It's not a dream, Bri. It's real. You knew that, didn't you?"

An icy hand gripped Kettering's heart. "Can you tell me what

happened?"

"It came after me, Bri. It was in our house when I went there. I got away, but it followed me here and it came up the stairs after me and it ... it caught me."

"What was it? What did it look like?"

"It looked ... it looked like a little piece of Hell."

Mavis's jaw sagged. Her eyes rolled back until only the bottom rim of the irises showed. She groaned once and her eyelids lowered.

Kettering cradled his wife's head and glared at the empty street. Where was that fucking ambulance? He turned back to Mavis. Her breathing was shallow, her pulse unsteady, but she was alive.

She had been lucid enough to talk about the attack. That was good. She didn't have to tell Kettering what it looked like. He knew.

Doomstalker.

***

The ambulance showed up in just under five minutes from the time Kettering had called. The attendants checked Mavis quickly, eased her onto a stretcher, and loaded her efficiently into the back of the van. Kettering followed them to the hospital in the Camaro.

He paced the Emergency waiting room while Mavis was being examined. Passing through as he waited were the sad and broken creatures who show up at late-night Emergency. Druggies and drunks and accident victims. A stabbing, a battered baby, a woman leaking blood from her mouth.

After what seemed like an hour a doctor emerged in a blood-spotted smock.

"You're the husband?"

"Yes. How is she?"

"She has broken ribs, multiple contusions and abrasions, possible internal injuries, and puncture wounds on her upper back and shoulders."

"Puncture wounds?"

"Yes. Hard to tell what might have caused them. We're lucky they weren't any deeper."

Kettering groaned.

"But most serious is a subdural hematoma. That's bleeding under the skull."

"I know what it is," Kettering snapped. "What has to be done?"

"We have to drill through the skull to release the pressure. I'll need your permission."

"You've got it. Do whatever has to be done. For chrissakes, hurry."

The doctor looked for a moment as though he were going to say something more, then he turned and walked away.

***

The waiting room upstairs was furnished in noncommittal beige and pastels and was open to the main hallway. It was cleaner than the one downstairs in Emergency and it smelled better. Except for Kettering, the room was empty. The occasional hospital employee who passed along the hall on silent feet avoided his eye. They had seen too much of other people's pain, and they had their own troubles.

Kettering sat on the couch and gnawed his fingernails and leafed through a month-old copy of *People*. The activities of Cher and Bruce Springsteen and Princess Di and the latest edition of Kennedys made no impression on his mind. Turning the pages merely gave his hands something to do.

Other than visits to friends, Kettering had been in a hospital twice in his life. Once, at age seven, when his appendix had burst

suddenly and unexpectedly as he ran home from the Liberty Theater in Prescott after seeing *The Thing*. That was but a dim memory filled with falsely smiling adult faces, whispered conversations just out of his hearing, and cramping pain in his gut.

The other time was to have a bullet removed from his head. Not as bad as it sounded. A kid stoked to the eyebrows on PCP had shot him with a little .22 popgun. The slug had not enough power to penetrate the skull, but had tunneled around under the scalp to a spot just over his left ear. It gave him a hell of a headache at the time, but left him with only a tiny scar and a good story for parties at the Dutchman's.

What Kettering remembered most about both his hospital stays, brief though they were, was the awful anxiety to get the hell out and breathe the free air of the street. Even as a visitor he cut his stays to the minimum.

Now, sitting in the waiting room while they drilled a hole in his wife's head, he wished desperately to be out of there. He was not hanging around out of any sense of marital responsibility. Okay, so he was not the ideal tender husband. He never claimed to be perfect. Hell, he was not even officially a husband anymore. He was an *estranged* husband. That curious breed so often written up in the papers when they blew away their estranged wife or their estranged wife's new boyfriend.

Kettering tossed *People* aside and picked up a copy of *Newsweek*. He recognized what he was doing. He was cluttering his mind with extraneous thoughts to keep out what was really trying to get in. The terror of his dreams and his childhood, the desecrater of his family, murderer of his friend, had struck again. And he was powerless to do anything about it.

"Come and get me, you sonofabitch," he muttered under his breath. "*Me!* I'm the one you want. Take me if you can. What are you waiting for?"

He tried to concentrate on an ad for Newport cigarettes in the magazine. Several young people were frolicking at the beach, smiling like crazy, cigarettes poised in their photogenic hands.

Kettering tried to remember if he had ever had that much fun smoking. Or doing anything else. He didn't think so.

H? became aware that someone had come into the waiting room and had not passed on through as did the nurses, doctors, and attendants. He looked up to see Gabrielle Wister standing there watching him. She had on no makeup and wore a blue blazer over a pair of designer jeans.

"Hello," she said after several seconds. Her expression was unreadable.

Kettering grunted.

"How is she?"

"I don't know. They're operating now. How did you hear about it?"

"The hospital called me. Mavis has my name in her wallet, to call in case of accident."

"Oh. Yeah." Somehow that fact made Kettering painfully aware of how far he and his wife had drifted apart.

Gabrielle took a chair well away from the couch where Kettering sat. He put down the magazine and pulled a Marlboro from his pack. As an afterthought he offered her one.

"I don't think you're supposed to smoke in here."

"Tough." He lit the cigarette and tossed the spent match on the floor. Gabrielle Wister watched him. The faintest of smiles twitched at a corner of her mouth.

Kettering grew uneasy under her gaze. A hot ash dropped from the cigarette and smoldered on his pants leg before he slapped it out. Her mouth twitched again.

A doctor came down the hall and frowned at the cigarette.

"I'll have to ask you to put that out. This is a nonsmoking area."

Kettering did not look at the woman as he ground the cigarette out against his sole.

"You don't like me very much," Gabrielle Wister said.

"I don't know you well enough to have an opinion."

"You don't approve of my lifestyle."

"Is there any reason why I should?"

"I didn't steal Mavis from you, you know."

"I don't think I want to talk about it."

"It's something that will have to be faced sooner or later."

"Maybe we could wait until we find out if she's going to live."

"She said you were tough."

"You had long talks about me?"

"No. But she told me some things. She told me you were hard on the outside, but inside you were a tender, caring man."

"Did you believe that?"

"Not completely. But I knew about people who are other than what they appear."

"Yeah, I suppose you would."

"I hope we're not going to have to fight over her. Because I'd win."

Kettering leaned toward the dark-haired woman. "Listen, Miss Wister, I don't really understand what happened between you and my wife. I can't pretend to like it because I don't. I'm not a moralist, and I'm not a prude, but I do not and will not believe that people of the same gender belong together in sexual combinations. Apparently whatever happened between you two happened because Mavis wanted it to. I am not going to give you my blessing, and I am not going to be your pal. I'll accept it as done, but that's the best

I can do."

"I'll take that," she said.

Kettering ground his teeth at the note of triumph in her voice. He wanted nothing more than to slap her off the chair.

Another doctor approached. He turned into the waiting room and looked uncertainly from one of them to the other.

"Are you both with Mrs. Kettering?"

"How is she?" Kettering said. He and Gabrielle stood up at the same time.

"She's conscious and she's out of danger."

Kettering's twisted nerves eased a notch.

"You can see her, but one at a time, and for no more than five minutes."

The man and the woman looked at each other.

"You go in," Gabrielle said. "I'll have plenty of time with her later."

Kettering held her eye for a moment longer, then followed the doctor down the hall to the recovery room.

Mavis lay in a tall, narrow bed, her head bandaged, her face swollen and bruised. But her eyes were open and alert.

"Hi," she said weakly.

"You're a mess," he said.

"I'll bet."

"How do you feel?"

"Sleepy."

"Is there anything I can bring for you?"

"There's something you can do," she said. "Find Trevor. He never came home. Find him, Bri. Find out if he's all right."

Trevor. Kettering had almost forgotten that he had a son. His original reason for checking out Enzo DuLac had been to trace Trevor, but in the aftermath of Al Diaz's death he had forgotten everything else.

"I'll find him," he told Mavis. "Don't worry."

She took his hand. Her fingers were cold but her grip was strong. "Bri, I'm sorry about the way things worked out. I wish ... I wish ..."

"I know," he said. "Don't worry about it now. Get better." He shifted uncomfortably. "Uh, there's someone else waiting to see you."

The flash of eagerness in his wife's eyes told Kettering all he needed to know. There was an ache in his throat as he kissed her fingers lightly and went out of the room.

As he passed the waiting room he saw Gabrielle Wister. Their eyes locked for a moment. Then Gabrielle rose and walked silently past him toward Mavis's room.

Kettering swore softly under his breath and strode off in the other direction.

Chapter 22

It was four A.M. when Kettering finally climbed into the sofa bed in his bachelor apartment. He was bone weary after a night that had begun with Enzo DuLac at The Pit and ended with Mavis battered and bandaged in a hospital bed.

Tired as he was, it seemed to Kettering that he did not sleep at all. But he did. In snatches and bits his mind let go. And the dreams crept in. Dreams filled with mocking images of DuLac, Mavis, Charity Moline, Gabrielle Wister, ambulances and doctors.

And lurking always, just off his line of vision but dominating the dreams with its presence ... Doomstalker.

Kettering twisted and turned, trying to get comfortable on the uneven mattress. He sweat through the sheets and punched the pillow into a crumpled ball. When he finally sat up to read the clock, he thought it must be around dawn. He was surprised to see it was ten A.M.

He pulled himself out of bed, showered, and made a cup of bitter instant coffee. He called the hospital and asked about Mavis. Her condition was fair. She was doing as well as could be expected. Hospital jargon that could best be translated as *she's still alive.*

The coffee gave him heartburn. He smoked a Marlboro, chewed a couple of Tums, and prowled the room restlessly. There was much he wanted to accomplish today, but he was unsure about where to start.

What the hell, why not start where he really wanted to. He picked up the phone again and dialed Charity Moline's number. He let the line buzz five, six, seven times before he hung up. Charity must be one of the last two or three people in Greater Los Angeles who did

not have a service or an answering machine.

Kettering shaved and dressed and went out. He had made a promise to Mavis last night; it was time he began keeping it. Time to find his son.

His first step was Van Nuys and the district office of the state Alcoholic Beverage Control Department. There, from the license issued for The Pit, he got the home address of Enzo DuLac. The owner, he noted, was listed as Horizons, Inc. Later he would track that down.

Kettering took the Hollywood Freeway to Sunset Boulevard, drove west on Sunset to the Strip. Dulac's address was a funky, expensive neighborhood of steep twisty streets. Kettering's thoughts were angry as he and the Camaro climbed into the high-rent district, past big, costly houses no honest cop would ever live in.

The higher he climbed, the madder he got. Why was some scummy little turd like Enzo DuLac, panderer, pimp, dope dealer, corrupter of minors, allowed to live up here while the hard-working honest people had to grub along down in the Valley to make the mortgage on a chicken coop?

He knew it was a bad idea for a cop to get mad on the job, but this was personal business. This sonofabitch was fucking with his son. By the time he found DuLac's street, Kettering's teeth were clamped together and his fingers gripped the steering wheel as though it were Enzo Dulac's throat.

***

At eleven o'clock in the morning Enzo DuLac, as always, slept soundly and without dreams. Since he slept by day, his windows were covered with heavy blue velvet draperies to keep out the intrusive California sunshine. The draperies were not really necessary, as DuLac had the ability to sleep anywhere under any conditions.

Even when he was a hungry young hustler, often on the run, DuLac could sleep. Any place, any time, uninhibited by any twinge of

conscience. So it would not have mattered now if the sun shone full into his rococo bedroom, but he liked the way the blue draperies looked from outside, as though something secret were going on in there. And there were times when the appearance was accurate.

It was not quite noon when he awoke slowly and with much smacking of his lips. He stretched, a small man who looked smaller all alone in the California king-size bed. He rolled onto his stomach and rubbed against the cool satin sheets. Nice. His erection grew. He reached a hand down to help it along.

He punched on the stereo that was built into the custom headboard and nodded his approval of the mellow fusion rock. Not for Enzo DuLac was the heavy-metal shit they played down at the club. The freaked-out, airhead kids might go for that ear-busting garbage, but Enzo DuLac had taste.

There was a movement in the open doorway. Carmelita stood there looking at him with huge brown eyes through the blue-black fringe of her hair. DuLac patted the sheet beside him and she scampered over and climbed in.

She was small even for her age, which was eleven. DuLac liked them small. In the world of adults he constantly had to look up at everybody. Even with lifts he stood only five feet four. Little girls had to look up at him.

Carmelita came over to the bed and touched his bare shoulder tentatively.

"In a minute," he said. "I'll tell you when."

The little girl understood no English, but she caught the tone of his voice and withdrew her small brown hand.

DuLac had got her from Jaime Quintero a month before. Quintero made frequent trips to Tijuana for the raw material to supply the needs of Hollywood's child fuckers, of whom there were more in high places than the moviegoing public imagined.

A year ago Enzo DuLac would not have been able to afford Jaime's

price, but fortune smiled on him now, and he no longer had to cruise Hollywood Boulevard after dark to appease his appetites.

Carmelita was enthusiastic and talented for her age, but DuLac was growing bored with her. In a week or so he would return her to Jaime and go for something new. Maybe a couple of years younger. All shapes, sizes, colors, and ages were available for a price.

The popular view that having sex with children might be abnormal never troubled Enzo DuLac. The fact that it was against the law was an annoyance, but a man who exercised reasonable discretion was not going to be bothered. The police were busy busting the smelly degenerates who hung around playgrounds with bags of cheap candy, hoping to lure some juicy youngster. The people who dealt with Jaime were of another class.

As for any moral problems, that matter had been solved for Enzo DuLac at the age of six, when he still lived in St. Louis and wore his original name: Edmund Disch. A boyfriend of his mother, a greasy number named Frankie, had introduced young Eddie to buggery and fellatio over the ineffectual protests of his wimpy mother. In the late 1970s Eddie ran off to San Francisco and changed his name. He hustled a meager living selling his skinny body to tourists, but he never grew to like the feeling of somebody's dick up his ass.

Fortunately, he got out and came to L.A. before the AIDS epidemic hit. He had some vague idea of getting into the movies, but soon discovered how hard that was, and took a job in a porno bookstore. It was while working there that he made connections and moved on to manage massage parlors, nude photography cribs, and a storefront on Santa Monica Boulevard called The Oral Sex Academy. There unwary customers discovered only after paying their money that what they got was conversation with girls in underwear, conducted through a grill in heavy plate glass.

Then came the big break in his life, when he made the connection that set him up as manager and front man for The Pit. The club turned out to be wildly successful, and for the first time Enzo DuLac was important and was making real money. Now that he had it, he intended to enjoy it to the maximum.

His sex life after San Francisco had been one of great caution. When repeated AIDS tests came out negative, he counted himself lucky. He swore off all homosexual contact, and remained wary of adult females. But he still had urges. Little girls provided the ideal outlet. No danger of getting mugged or getting AIDS, and no worry about commitment or demands. Enzo DuLac figured he had achieved just about the best of all possible worlds.

He reached over and rubbed Carmelita's brown little stomach. "Okay, Chicita, make me happy."

Carmelita peeled back the satin sheet and crawled down in the bed. DuLac arranged himself for her.

Crash!

DuLac jerked erect in bed at the explosion of sound from the front of his house. The little girl cringed and watched him with frightened eyes.

"What the fuck?" he muttered. This neighborhood was supposed to be crime free.

DuLac had a gun, but it was in a box up on a high shelf in his closet. Unloaded. He liked to take it out and hold it sometimes, but he had never seriously thought about firing it at anybody. Now he heartily wished he had kept it at hand, ready to blow away whatever sonofabitch was stomping through his house.

The figure of a man filled the doorway. It took several seconds for DuLac to recognize him as the cop who had come sniffing around the club last night.

What the hell was going on? Even the stupidest cop in the department knew enough not to bust into a guy's house. He was going to find himself in big trouble when this was reported.

Kettering marched across the room and snatched open the draperies, flooding the room with harsh sunlight.

"What the fuck are you doing?" DuLac piped, encouraged by the thought that right was on his side.

Kettering scowled at the little Mexican girl. "Get out of here, kid."

Carmelita jumped off the bed and scurried from the room.

DuLac pulled the satin sheet around his body and slid his butt up in the bed until his back was against the cushioned headboard.

"Remember me?" Kettering said.

"Dirty Harry."

"The name is Kettering. Detective Sergeant Brian Kettering."

"You're going to be in deep shit for this," DuLac said.

"I'm really worried about that. You do a lot of baby-fucking?"

"I don't have to listen to that."

"Then listen to this question, and you'd better have an answer. Where's my son?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

"You should know because he's been hanging around that cesspool of yours. The Pit. His name is Trevor Kettering. He's underage." The last part was not exactly true, since Trevor was a legal adult, but Kettering saw no reason to split hairs.

"You think I know every punk who comes in there?"

"I think you know this one, and I think you're going to tell me about him." Kettering had a sudden icy doubt about what he was doing. His rational mind told him that DuLac couldn't possibly know all the kids who frequented The Pit. But his rational mind was eclipsed by the rage that had built on the drive over here. Kettering knew he had passed the point of no return.

"What did you say the name was?" DuLac was growing uneasy over the wild look this cop had. He might just do something crazy, like attack him physically.

Kettering spoke slowly and distinctly. "Trevor ... Kettering."

"Never heard of him. No bull."

Kettering reached for his hip and was gratified to see DuLac flinch as though he were about to be shot. He pulled out his wallet and flapped it open to a photograph of Trevor taken about a year ago, before he had gone for the Bruce Willis haircut. He shoved the picture in front of DuLac's dribbling nose.

"His hair's different now, one of those short spiky jobs, but this is what he looks like."

"Never saw him before," DuLac said, looking warily up at Kettering.

With his free hand Kettering grabbed the smaller man by the throat. He pulled DuLac forward to a kneeling position and squeezed, enjoying the way the man's eyes bulged. "Look again."

DuLac clawed feebly at Kettering's wrist, trying to break the hold. He bobbed his head up and down and croaked something that sounded like, "Okay, okay!"

Kettering released his grip and the little man sagged back on the bed, massaging his throat.

"Jesus, you fucking near strangled me."

"I can do worse than that."

"No, wait a minute. Lemme see that picture again."

Kettering held it up for him.

"Oh, yeah, I think I know that one. He's one of the last bunch that went up to Harmony Village."

"What's that?"

DuLac spoke rapidly, keeping his eyes on Kettering's hands. "It's Zoara Sol's place up in the mountains. Kind of a retreat, like. Kids go up there and, hell, I don't know what they do. Camp out or

something. Commune with nature. There's a lot of lost kids and runaways come to The Pit that don't know what to do with their lives. Zoara gives them a place to go, something to do with their lives. The ones she thinks will 'work out.'"

"What do you mean, 'workout'?"

"Look, I told you I don't know what she does up there. I never been there, and I don't want to go. It's none of my business."

"You've got some kind of a deal with this woman?"

"She owns my place, that's the deal I got. I work for her."

"Who is she, anyway?"

"All I know is she calls herself Zoara Sol and she signs the checks. You saw her at my office last night."

With a jolt Kettering remembered the pale-haired woman with the silvery eyes and the visceral effect the short glimpse had on him.

"Where is this Harmony Village?"

"All I know is it's up Bichota Canyon in the Angeles National Forest. Don't ask me how to get there."

"I won't." Kettering turned and started toward the door.

Getting brave, now that he was off the hook, DuLac said, "You know, Kettering, you can lose your badge for busting into a guy's place and rousting him like this."

With the rage boiling up again, Kettering turned and walked back to the bed in measured steps.

"What did you say?"

"I just mean, if I was going to report it ..."

"I would love to have you report it, you little slime. Because then I would be relieved from duty, and as a private citizen I could come

up here and break you into little chunks. As a cop I am not allowed to do that, but as a private citizen I don't think I would get anything but congratulations for wiping one more piece of shit off the face of the city. So report me, DuLac. Please."

Enzo DuLac's throat crimped as he fought to swallow. Kettering gave a snort of disgust and marched out the door.

Chapter 23

Kettering climbed the wooden stairs up the outside of his apartment building slowly. The day was getting hot and he was tired. Tired from what? he asked himself. He hadn't accomplished fuck-all since the night he shot his front door full of holes.

Well, not quite true. He had learned a name, Zoara Sol. And he had a place where his son might be, Harmony Village, somewhere in the mountains. And he had also thrown a small scare into Enzo DuLac.

Kettering let himself in and clumped across the room to the refrigerator. He yanked open the door and peered into the barren interior. One lonely can of Coors sat on the top shelf. He popped it open and drank gratefully.

Holding the beer can, he looked around the cramped apartment. The place didn't look any better than when he'd left it a couple of hours ago. No brownies had slipped in during his absence to clean up and make the place homelike.

Frankly, the room was a mess. A pot with a little water in it sat cold on the stove. This morning's dirty coffee cup rested on the table where he left it. The open jar of instant coffee was still on the drain board with brown granules spilled over the floor. Dirty clothes lay about the room, an ashtray overflowed onto the table. Hell, he hadn't spent enough time here to create this kind of clutter.

All a man needed, he had been fond of saying, was someplace warm and dry where he could kick off his shoes and stretch out. He was wrong.

Now he could see, as uncounted men before him, all the little maintenance tasks and unnoticed jobs that are handled by the women in their lives to make the home livable. He had taken for

granted things like the bed being made, the beer supply maintained, the dishes washed and out of sight. Hell, any number of things. Now he could see.

The unmade sofa bed sprawled across his floor space like something that had washed up on the beach. Kettering stuffed the sheets and blankets inside without bothering to fold them and levered the thing shut. The seat did not rest quite parallel to the floor, but it would have to do.

He dropped onto the sofa and swallowed some more beer. His whole life was beginning to look like an unmade bed. An uncomfortable condition for a man with a strong sense of order. He leaned back and tried to sort out the various elements.

Overriding everything else was the shadow of Doomstalker. From out of the past it had found him. Or had he ever really been free of it, his own personal nightmare? Maybe it had always been there, lurking just beyond the limits of his vision, waiting to strike. What did it want from him? Somehow it was tied to that dreadful long-ago day in Prescott, Indiana, when he had heard his father in deadly argument. The day he had looked in his window and seen ... and seen ... what?

If he could just remember, it might be the vital clue. He closed his eyes, but as always, the day came back in fragments. The fresh smell of the park. The slap of his tennis shoes. The strange chill. The sound of the angry voices. The pizza truck.

The pizza truck? What the hell did that have to do with anything? It must figure, because it was so often in his dreams. It was something out of place. A clue. But where did it lead?

Kettering gave up and drained the last of the beer. He was a rational man who had never accepted the reality of curses or spells and other occult playthings. Halloween stuff to scare the kiddies. And yet ... and yet ... there were the dreams. There was the thing lurking at his door that had turned into a boy, who had turned into ... nothing. There was the savage murder of Al Diaz, the attack on Mavis. There was the sudden collapse of his comfortable life.

So here he sat in a depressing one-room apartment with dirty dishes in the sink, dirty clothes lying on the floor, sheets stuffed out of sight. He had been shucked like an old coat by his family. Yanked off his job on the street.

And now his last can of beer was empty. His wife was in the hospital. His son off on some nutty trip in the mountains. Not an encouraging tally sheet.

Kettering strained to come up with something positive about his situation. He crumpled the Coors can and tossed it at the carton that served as his trash receptacle. He missed and the can clattered across the floor and hid behind the refrigerator.

"Figures," he muttered.

Abruptly he sat up straighter. There *was* one positive thing in his life, if he hadn't fucked that up too. Charity Moline. He picked up the phone, punched the first digit of her number, then hung up.

He had never been good on the phone for anything beyond the basics - making or breaking an appointment, placing an order, confirming information. With things the way they were with him and Charity - spiky, at best - he had to talk to her in person to patch things up.

Kettering showered, shaved, put on a fresh shirt and slacks, and headed for the Hollywood Hills.

***

As he twisted the Camaro up through the canyon roads where thick chaparral grew down close to the shoulder, he caught himself listening to the silence outside. The hills never did have the clamor of the streets below, but there was always *some* sound - the whir of a Weed Eater or bang of a hammer somewhere. The engine of a passing car or motorcycle. The steady traffic *schuss* from the San Diego Freeway through the Sepulveda Pass. This afternoon he seemed to drive along in a cocoon of unnatural silence.

Seeing the silver-gray Mazda parked out in front of the stone

cottage gave Kettering a pleasurable little jolt. He immediately clamped down on his anticipation. All it meant was that Charity was home. She might very well refuse to talk to him. He couldn't blame her. So before he got all excited, he sat for a moment to prepare himself for rejection.

Charity's cottage was bright and even more Disneylike under the afternoon sun than it had seemed at night. Flowers surrounded it in a kind of orderly confusion. Kettering inhaled their fragrance as he climbed the steps and followed the flagstone walk to her door.

He thumbed the door bell and listened to the merry chimes inside. No one opened the door. He heard no footfalls within.

He looked down at the Mazda and back at the house. Had she seen him drive up and was deliberately not answering the bell? No, that was not like Charity. She would not hide. If she had anything to say to him, even if it was *Take a hike, asshole*, she would do it in person. Kettering felt a warning prickle on the back of his neck. He shivered.

He rang the bell again. A bee buzzed around a patch of pansies by the door. A crow sailed down on silent wings and perched in a eucalyptus tree. The door stayed closed.

Kettering tensed. Something was wrong.

Then he smelled the smoke. Not the friendly smoke of somebody's barbecue, not the Forest Service burning slash, and not one of the deadly brushfires that periodically swept these hills. It was the smell of burning wood and cloth and plastic. Somebody's house. Charity's house.

He rattled the doorknob. Locked. The solid panel would take too long to break through. A wisp of brown smoke now curled around the side of the cottage. Kettering raced through the flowers and back along the wall to Charity's bedroom window. It was open about eight inches, and that was where the smoke came from.

He raised on tiptoe and looked in. The room was a mass of flames, now roaring and crackling. From out in front he had heard no fire

sounds. Lying on the floor between the bed and the door, as yet untouched by the flames, was Charity Moline.

Kettering did not hesitate. He stripped off his windbreaker and pulled it over his head like a hood. Then he planted both hands on the windowsill and levered himself up, shoving the sliding window up into the frame. He dived forward into the blazing bedroom.

The heat blasted him like the breath of Hell. For a moment he lost his sense of place and purpose as the smoke billowed around him and the heat curled the short hairs at the back of his neck. He stumbled forward. His foot struck something yielding on the floor. Charity.

He crouched, lungs fighting against the superheated air, and slid his arms beneath the prone woman.

He straightened, cradling Charity's body against his own. The smoke he had inhaled fogged his mind. His legs rebelled, buckling and sending him stumbling toward the growing wall of flame.

He opened his mouth and roared at the fire, "No you don't! You won't take me!"

The sound of his own voice snapped him to full consciousness. He staggered around, saw the window open and beckoning to the bright, cool safety of the outside. Half falling, half running, he crossed the blazing bedroom, hit the open window at mid-thigh, and toppled out head first, carrying Charity with him.

Kettering felt the ground smash his head and shoulder. He smelled the soft fragrance of peonies and gulped the blessed cool air in through his nose and mouth. He pushed himself to a squatting position, hooked his hands under Charity's arms and dragged her step by step away from the cottage to safety. Then the world spun, blacked out, and he collapsed.

The sound of Charity coughing brought him back. He shook his head and was again fully alert.

Kneeling, he looked down at the woman who lay in front of him.

Her eyelids fluttered and blinked open. He could see no sign that she had been burned, other than a singeing of hair ends.

She pulled in a deep breath, coughed again, and looked up at him. "Where did you come from?"

He almost laughed in the foolish joy of seeing that she was all right. Then he remembered the fire and her cottage. He looked back toward the bedroom window through which the two of them had tumbled to safety moments before. His jaw dropped.

Where angry flames should have been exploding from the frame, belching smoke and blackening the stone exterior of the cottage, there was only a wisp of brown.

"What the hell?"

Charity pulled herself up to a sitting position. She frowned at him. "What's the matter?"

"A minute ago we both damn near got barbecued in your bedroom. Now there's no sign of a fire."

"Fire?" Charity coughed again. "Oh, yes. I was lying on the bed, taking a nap. Something woke me up. All I remember is the heat and I couldn't breathe. I started for the door ... and then here I was with you."

"Just a minute."

Kettering got up and walked back to the bedroom window. The curtain had a ragged burn on the bottom. Inside, the fluffy white rug that covered the hardwood floor was charred. A light haze of smoke was quickly dissipating. No flames. No heat. No serious damage that he could see.

"What do you make of it?"

Charity's voice close to his ear made Kettering jump. He looked at her, then back into the bedroom.

"You're lucky. The whole house ought to be going up like a torch by

now. You don't have a sprinkler system, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"Then this wasn't any natural fire."

"I don't get you."

Kettering took hold of the woman's shoulders and turned her gently to face him. "Think hard. What's the last thing you remember?"

"As I said, I lay down to take a nap. That's not my usual habit, but for some reason I got fantastically sleepy. I thought I'd just rest my eyes for a minute. I turned to look at something at the window and - " She stopped.

"What was at the window?" Kettering said.

"It was ... it was ... a silhouette. A man, maybe. Tall. Strange-looking hands. Something funny about the head. It's just a quick impression. A flash. Then I was asleep."

Kettering stared at her, then back into the bedroom. He took her hand and drew her away from the house.

"What was it?" she said. "Do you think ... ?"

"Yeah. I think so. Listen, how are you? Should you get treatment?"

"I'm fine. A little shaky on my feet, and a sore throat, is all."

"I want you to pack a few things and come to my place. You can rest up there while we try to figure out what the hell is going on."

"Brian," she said, "was it a real fire?"

"Real enough."

She pulled his head down and kissed him softly on the mouth. "It's pretty lucky for me that you happened by when you did."

"Maybe. Or maybe I was supposed to show up. Maybe this was a demonstration. Some kind of a warning." He gently disengaged her

hands from behind his head. "Come on, pack some things."

"Okay." She smiled at him and started into the cottage. At the door she stopped and turned to face him. "Hey, I just remembered. I'm supposed to be mad at you."

"We can fight later," he said. "Move it."

She punched him on the arm, then vanished into the cottage.

***

Kettering sat on the convertible sofa and marveled at the transformation in his tiny bachelor apartment brought about by the arrival of one woman with one medium-sized suitcase. The dishes were washed and put away, the dirty laundry out of sight, the floor clean, the ashtray emptied.

And there was more. His clothes were shoved to one end of the pole in the small wardrobe closet, while an astonishing number of dresses, jackets, sweaters, skirts, slacks filled the rest. The limited shelf space in the bathroom had disappeared under a jumble of bottles, tubes, jars, soaps, sprayers, and tiny implements, the nature of which he could only guess.

It looks, he thought with a twinge of alarm, like she's moving in permanently.

"I'll bet," she called from the bathroom, "you think I'm moving in permanently."

He was so startled by her telepathy that he could only wave a hand feebly in reply.

"Well, don't worry. We'll make other arrangements tomorrow. No offense, but I think we'd be at each other's throats after about forty-eight hours of this kind of intimacy."

Kettering could not deny it.

Charity finished arranging her toilet articles and came out to sit beside him.

"Seriously, Brian, what are we going to do?"

"Eventually I'm going to have to face this thing, whatever it is ..."

"Your Doomstalker," she said.

"Okay. Eventually, I'm going to have to face it and destroy it."

"I said *we,* Kettering."

"This isn't your fight."

"Oh, no? Wasn't it I who damn near got incinerated in my own bedroom a little while ago?"

"It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't known me," he said. "It's a pattern. Jessie, Mavis, Trevor, Al. Now you. Anybody close to me is in danger."

"All the more reason I should be a part of the team."

"Well, maybe. There's something I have to do before we start making plans."

"What's that?"

"My kid is involved with some goofy outfit up in the mountains. I promised his mother I'd bring him back."

"What if he doesn't want to come back, Kettering?"

"I'll face that when it comes up. I promised I'd find him, and that's what I'm going to do."

"I understand," she said. "I wouldn't expect anything else from you. One question - can it wait until tomorrow?"

"That's what I had in mind. Why, was there something you wanted to do today?"

"Uh-huh."

"What?"

She reached over and pulled his head down to hers. The kiss did not end quickly. This time they did not wait to fold the sofa out into a bed.

Chapter 24

This was the Quiet Time.

No shit, that's what they called it. The Quiet Time. It sounded like something from *Sesame Street*, but what the hell, it was fine with Trevor Kettering. They could call it anything they wanted to.

If anyone had told him a month ago that he would willingly participate in something called Quiet Time, he would have fallen down laughing. What you were expected to do was go and stay in your room and be alone and silent. Alone? Who *ever* wanted to be alone? And silent? Not while there were CDs and tapes and records and FM stations and MTV.

No way.

Yet here he was, sitting in his tiny room in a mountain camp called Harmony Village that he hadn't even heard of a month ago. He sat alone, and there was no sound other than the whisper of Douglas fir boughs against the wall outside.

The really weird thing was, he was happy. He was way the hell up in the woods with a bunch of kids he hardly knew and he was happier than he could ever remember being.

The Quiet Time, they explained to him, was designed to let him reflect on his life before and after coming to Harmony Village. Trevor was not much for reflection, but he didn't mind remembering how things had been before, and especially what happened to bring him here.

His life at home, at least this past year, had been without direction, without purpose. His teachers were preoccupied with getting higher salaries, his parents treated him with edgy tolerance, his friends

were shallow, the girls were all nervous about VD. Nothing seemed to be going right. Then one night he had wandered into The Pit.

At first he was not impressed. The tacky decor, supposed to make the place look like a cave or something, was no big deal. There was the same old loud music, the same smell of mingled sweat and perfume, the same crowd of kids trying to outcool each other, the same older guys at the bar trying to score with the young stuff.

The kids that hung out there were a little more rootless and a little funkier than the usual Valley types, but you had to look close to see anything different from a hundred other clubs that sprung up and died like mushrooms around Los Angeles.

Like everything else in his life, Trevor found The Pit to be a disappointment. But that was before he met Zoara Sol.

After that, everything was different. The Pit became a wild and wonderful place of dreams. A magical cavern with hidden doors to untold delights. The music flowed through his body and liberated his spirit. It was like discovering the best dope in the world, only it was even better than dope.

Drugs had never been Trevor's thing. He had tried a few of them when they were offered, grass, hash, reds, coke, but he did it as much to prove the cop's kid was cool as anything else. And it gave him a small charge to know that his parents never had a clue. After that, the kick was gone.

Even when you discounted the ravings of the antidrug crowd, Trevor knew that most of them could do something bad to your brain or your body. He didn't need that. What you got out of drugs was not worth what using them finally cost you.

Hell, most kids knew that. Just like their parents knew alcohol could pickle their livers and cigarettes rot their lungs. So what? Nobody really thought it would happen to them.

Through Zoara Sol, Trevor discovered a high that was beyond anything you could get from drugs. He guessed it was something like those pain-in-the-ass Born Again Christians claimed they got

out of their religion. Only this was better. There was no bullshit about faith and sin and all that testifying and I-found-it crap. You just felt good. All because of the magical woman with silver eyes.

When Zoara Sol was near, everything around you was brighter, cleaner, softer. Suddenly you were completely in touch with your body. Your mind snapped back answers to questions you hadn't dared ask. You were bright, witty, beautiful, friendly; and so was everybody else. It was, Trevor guessed, a little bit like dying and going to Heaven. If you believed in Heaven.

The effect lasted even after Zoara Sol had gone, and it wore off gradually, and with zero aftereffects. The only bad thing was that reality all seemed to be shades of gray after the brilliant colors you saw with her. The good part was that you knew she was coming back.

Before he met Zoara Sol, Trevor heard about her from the guys he met at The Pit. You did not just meet her, they told him. She sent for you. When she did, you were in for a brand-new experience.

At the time he did not pay a lot of attention to their ravings. Okay, so this was a foxy lady with special talents. What was the big deal? Nobody could be as terrific as they were making her out to be. So he believed. When he finally met her himself, Trevor understood.

On the night he met Zoara Sol, Trevor was hanging around late because he did not want to go home. To kill time he was playing a video game called Annihilator. Trevor had great hand-eye coordination, and he already had his initials on the screen when it flashed up the top ten scorers. He was shooting for the next level when Enzo DuLac oiled up to him.

"What's happenin', dude?"

DuLac was laughable when he tried to talk like the kids who came to his club. He used a combination of archaic slang and trendy words that he dropped into the wrong places. The kids tolerated him because he owned the place and he had the power to banish anyone who gave him shit. To be eighty-sixed at The Pit was the ultimate downer.

"Hi," Trevor said, keeping his concentration on the video screen. His score was rapidly approaching seven figures as he destroyed the Gelph Monster with a laser blast.

"Somebody wants to meet you."

"Yeah?" Trevor's nostrils pinched at the overpowering scent of Jade East. DuLac must marinate in the stuff. "Who?"

"Zoara Sol."

An enemy ship slipped past his defenses and blasted him to atoms as Trevor's concentration wavered. He had always pretended to be unaffected by the wild tales of what happened when you were sent for by Zoara Sol, but he could not now prevent a sudden hollow feeling in his stomach and a light-headed giddiness.

"Now?" he said.

"Now," DuLac affirmed. "She's back in my office. Waiting for you."

Trevor abandoned the Annihilator and let his chance of moving up in the high-scorers list vanish in a multicolored starburst. You did not keep Zoara Sol waiting.

"You do know where my office is?"

Trevor gestured toward the crimson curtain at the far end of the bar. "Through there somewhere."

"Down the hall. It's on the right. Don't get lost." DuLac smirked at him as he headed back there.

Trevor moved through the writhing bodies on the dance floor and slipped past the curtain. He continued through the door beyond it and stepped into a new phase of his life.

The hallway smelled bad. It was narrow and dimly lit by low-wattage bulbs widely spaced along the ceiling. There was only one door on the right. Trevor stopped in front of it and raised a fist to knock. Then he decided, what the hell, I'm invited, and walked in.

The office was empty. There was DuLac's cluttered desk, a couple of chairs, a file cabinet. On the walls were posters of the great heavy-metal bands who would not be caught dead playing a smalltime club like The Pit. There were no windows. A second door in the far wall stood open about six inches. Behind it there was a warm orange glow.

"In here, Trevor." The voice muted, low register, musical, came from beyond the other door.

Trevor crossed the office and pushed the second door all the way open. He stood for a moment on the threshold. The carpet under his feet was thick and spongy. The light was soft. In the air was the faintest hint of sandalwood incense. From hidden speakers came a compelling melody in soft ringing tones like great silver bells.

All these sensations slipped to a far corner of Trevor's consciousness as he looked at the woman.

Zoara Sol stood in front of a white satin love seat that rested on a dais across the room. She wore a shimmery garment of pale blue that descended from milky shoulders, caressed the high breasts, flowed over the flat belly, and ended midway down the most luscious pair of thighs Trevor had ever seen in real life or in any of the magazines he hid from his parents.

"Close the door, please." Her lips, a glossy shade of pink, formed the words deliberately. The purring voice reached inside Trevor's clothes and caressed him.

He did as he was told.

"Come over here."

His legs moved without a conscious order from his mind, carrying him across the lush carpet toward the woman. The pale hair floated in a cloud framing her high-cheekboned face. The wild, silvery eyes looked into his soul.

"I am Zoara Sol."

"I know." He was embarrassed by the piping adolescent sound of his

voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm glad to meet you."

Shit, what a nerdy way to introduce himself. To save his life, Trevor could not think up anything even slightly clever to say. The vision of the spectacular woman with those crazy silver eyes had paralyzed his brain. Zoara Sol did not seem to notice. She smiled at him.

"Come up here with me," she said.

He realized he was standing at the base of the dais staring stupidly up at her like some geek in front of a museum statue. He stepped up and stood facing her.

The woman was as tall as he was. There was the scent of some spice coming from her. Cloves. Delicious. For a moment Trevor thought he might fall down.

Zoara Sol reached out and took both his hands.

"You're an attractive man, Trevor."

Man! Not *boy*. Not *young* man. It was the first time anyone - male, female, child, or adult - had called him a man. He felt his scrotum tighten and the beginning of a hard-on.

"You're ..." He groped, for a return compliment. What could he possibly say to this unbelievable woman that would even hint at the exploding emotions within him? He finally settled for, "You're ... beautiful."

"Thank you." Her pleasure at the corny compliment was so sincere, you would think he had just produced a love sonnet. "I think it is time we came to know each other."

"I'd like that." Better. At least he was getting his words out now without squeaking.

"Would you like to make love to me?"

The words were spoken in the same hushed, caressing tone that she had been using, yet the effect on Trevor was that of being clonged

in the back of the head with a shovel.

"Oh ... God ... yes!"

She smiled. Her teeth were white and perfect. What else could they be? The silver eyes slid slowly down his body, then back to his face.

"Take off your clothes," she said. "Then you can undress me."

With fingers that felt like sausages, Trevor fumbled open the buttons of his shirt and pulled it off. He went to work on the fly of his Levi's 501's, wishing he had worn the zippered Wranglers tonight instead. He pushed the jeans down his slim legs and realized with acute embarrassment that he should have taken off his Reeboks first. Now he had to sit and pull them off his feet before he could get out of the jeans.

Feeling more exposed than ever in his life, Trevor glanced up at Zoara Sol while he tugged at the suddenly stubborn denim. If she was laughing at him, he would die right there.

She was not laughing. She stood straight, hands at her sides, watching him. Her expression showed affection, anticipation. Nothing more. The silky blue shift rose and fell gently with her breasts in time with her breathing.

At last he fought his way out of the jeans and stood up. Although he did not look directly at her, Trevor was intensely aware of the woman who stood quietly watching him, giving off the faint, maddening scent of sandalwood. He fancied he could feel the heat of her body from four feet away.

Trevor hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his Ralph Lauren briefs, silently thankful he had put on a clean pair for tonight.

"Let me do that," she said, and stepped forward to where their bodies were that close to touching. "Do you mind?"

"Huh-uh. No." Trevor took his hands away and swallowed, trying to clear his dry throat.

His erection strained painfully against the thin material of his

briefs, dampening them visibly.

Zoara Sol's silver eyes caressed him. She lay the palms of her hands against his bare chest. Trevor's eyes closed as he savored the heat of her touch. Slowly, slowly, she slid her hands down across his nipples, over his ribcage, down his stomach. Her fingers insinuated their way under the band of his shorts, slipping into the pubic hair. She touched his cock. He damn near screamed.

Dipping gracefully, she pushed the damp briefs down Trevor's legs, allowing his stiff member to spring free. Her eyes never left his face. When he opened his own eyes to peek at her, she held his glance like a magnet holds BBs.

Zoara Sol went to her knees before him. Trevor reached down clumsily to help her up. Gently she put his hands aside. She curled the fingers of one hand around his cock and dipped forward.

Oh my God look what she's doing! I don't believe it!

Watching the sway of the pale cloud of hair as her head moved forward and back, forward and back, swallowing him, letting him out, was so hypnotic, Trevor almost forgot the wild feelings caused by the play of her lips and tongue and teeth down there. Almost.

After a minute or so of agonizing ecstasy, she drew back her head and let his rigid member slide free. She kissed the very tip, setting him on fire, and stood up to look him in the eye.

"Good?" she said.

"Oh, Jesus," was all he could manage.

She put a hand behind his head and pulled his face to hers. When they kissed him, he tasted himself on her lips, her tongue.

Trevor groaned when she released him. At that moment the only thing he feared in the world was that she might leave him.

"We've only just begun," she said, and led him to the love seat.

At some point during the next incredible hour, Zoara Sol had told

him about Harmony Village, a place where young people could live without the stress of dealing with the world. She invited him to come. He never hesitated.

***

A soft knock at the door snapped Trevor out of the erotic reverie and back to his room in Harmony Village. The door opened and Vicki came in. She was small and trim, with an ass you wanted to bite. Vicki was his guide at Harmony Village. Everybody was assigned a guide when they first got here. Trevor figured he had lucked out.

He sat up quickly, aware that Vicki was looking at his hard-on.

"Time for the Baths," she said.

"What's the Baths?"

"Just what it sounds like. You'll love it."

She walked over and stood in front of him. "Are you ready to go?"

"If I was any readier, I couldn't stand up."

Vicki took his hand and led him out of the room.

Chapter 25

The city ends abruptly just north of the Foothill Freeway. There State Highway 2 slices away from the boulevard in La Canada and becomes the Angeles Crest Highway. The climb into the mountains begins immediately, and the only reminders of urban blight are the ascending aerial vistas of Glendale and Pasadena where the twisting road lips the mountainside. The higher you go the more visible is the yellow-brown layer of smog that hangs over the San Gabriel Valley.

The Camaro handled the grade nicely, grabbing hold of the blacktop on the hairpin turns and climbing without effort into the green San Gabriel Mountains. Kettering lowered both windows and inhaled the cool, virgin air that flowed above the inversion level.

He met no more than half a dozen cars coming down. With so many beaches and theme parks within easy driving distance, the mountains had never been a popular getaway for Angelenos. This left the scattered picnic areas relatively clean and blessedly unscarred by graffiti.

Where the road leading to Mount Wilson and the observatory branched off, Kettering pulled into the ranger station and parked.

Inside, a young man with glasses and a collegiate look greeted him. He wore a neatly pressed tan uniform, the shirt open at the throat.

"Afternoon. On your way to the observatory? No charge. Just be out by four o'clock. We lock up then."

"Actually, I'm looking for something else that's supposed to be up here somewhere. Place called Harmony Village. Heard of it?"

The ranger's smile went away. "I've heard of it. Used to be a Boy

Scout camp. They quit it maybe ten years ago. Now it's a so-called young people's lodge."

"So-called?"

"I've never seen it myself. Heard stories, is all. Are you, uh, connected with the place?"

"I think my son is staying there."

"Oh, well, you never know. The place may be perfectly okay."

"Yeah, maybe. What do you know about the woman who runs it? Zoara Sol?"

"Just what I hear. I've never met the lady."

"What do you hear?"

"Trucker who delivers food up there says she's got a body will stop a man's heart."

"That good?"

"So he says. But you know how truckers exaggerate."

"You've never seen her."

"Nope. And it's probably just as well. I'm a married man and I'd like to stay that way."

"Ever have any trouble at her place?"

"We've never had any complaints, not officially, about what goes on there. All I know is she has all the required permits and all the fees are paid. Beyond that, it's no business of the Forest Service."

"How do I get there from here?"

The ranger walked to the door and pointed up the mountain. "Follow the highway about three miles, you'll cross Barley Creek, there's a private road off to the left. No sign or anything, so you'll have to look sharp."

Kettering thanked the ranger and headed for his car.

"Sir?"

He turned at the ranger's voice.

"Be careful."

"Of what?"

The young man was suddenly embarrassed. He took off the glasses and started polishing them. "Just ... the road. It's narrow, and there are a lot of steep dropoffs."

"Thanks," Kettering said. "I'll watch it."

He had the distinct impression that the ranger had something more he wanted to say, but the young man merely nodded and went back into the station.

***

At three miles exactly he crossed the short bridge over Barley Creek. Kettering slowed down and watched closely along the left shoulder for the private road.

The ranger was right about it being easy to miss. Kettering almost drove past the road before he spotted the faint depression in the roadside brush. He backed up and nosed the Camaro through and started up the steep grade. A sign about ten yards in, not visible from the highway, warned:

PRIVATE ROAD. NO TRESPASSING

It was little more than a double-rutted trail snaking up the side of the mountain through Douglas fir, blue spruce, and balsam. The air was fragrant with the tang of evergreen. The sky a hard, clear blue.

Kettering slowed to ten miles an hour as stretches of the road were cluttered by rockfall from the cliffs above. On the other side the road fell away in murderous drops into the deep canyons. He was glad to meet no traffic, as there were only a few places wide enough

for two vehicles to pass.

He jockeyed the Camaro around a thick growth of brush and almost ran into a heavy wood crossbar that blocked the road. A blond, muscular young man strolled to the side of the car. He was familiar to Kettering, except for the expression, which was smiling now. He wore a tight-fitting red T-shirt with HARMONY VILLAGE scrolled across the front in black letters.

"Hi," he said. "Help you?"

Kettering looked up at him through the side window. "You give up bouncing at The Pit?"

The blonde laughed. "That's just now and then. This is where I am most of the time. My name's Bolo. What can I do for you?"

"My name's Kettering, and you can get that log out of the road so I can get by."

Bolo's smile was undimmed. "You must be Trevor's father. I remember you now from the club. Sorry about the misunderstanding that night."

"Forget it," Kettering said. He pointed at the crossbar. "The gate?"

The young man's smiled stayed in place as he kept his face at the window several seconds longer. "Why, sure. Always glad to welcome a visiting parent."

He put a shoulder to the heavy crossbar and heaved it to the vertical without apparent effort. "Have a nice afternoon."

Kettering drove on slowly, watching the trees on both sides of the road for any surprises. None appeared, and he began to feel a little foolish.

Music came tinkling from somewhere. Kettering guessed that speakers must be hidden up in the trees. He could not identify any of the songs, but the overall effect was a kind of pleasurable tension.

The road stopped in a clearing where a small pickup, a station wagon, and a van with the scrollwork HARMONY on the side were parked. Beyond the clearing was a cluster of rustic buildings. They looked shabby and in serious need of repair. A ribbon of pale smoke rose from a chimney on one of the buildings. No signs of life showed in the others.

As Kettering approached, a thin girl in a red and black T-shirt like the one worn by the gate guard came toward him. She wore a friendly smile, but her eyes were watchful.

The girl held out a hand. "Mr. Kettering, hello."

He took the hand. It was cool and strong. He could feel the knuckle bones move.

"Do I know you?" he said.

"My name's Hillary. Bolo called from the gate to tell us you were coming up."

He looked around uncertainly. "I'd like to talk to my son."

"Everyone's in the Baths right now."

"The Baths?"

"That's what we call it. Want to see?"

"Well, I - "

She took his hand and led him off toward the buildings. They didn't look any more inviting close up. It was hard to imagine his comfort-loving son settling in here.

The camp, or village, was nearly deserted, except for an occasional young man or woman doing some kind of chore. One worked in a garden, another chopped logs into fireplace size. As Kettering and Hillary passed, the campers smiled and waved.

He tried to imagine his Trevor up here among the pines happily chopping wood. It did not compute. Trevor started getting antsy if

he was out of sight of a freeway.

"What is this place," Kettering asked, "some kind of commune?"

Hillary laughed. "Oh, no, nothing like that. Communes went out in the sixties with the hippies."

"You're not hippies, then?"

"Mr. Kettering, do we look like hippies? Do I look like a hippie?"

"No," he admitted, "you don't. More like some Fundamentalist Christian youth group."

This time she really laughed. "I've *got* to tell that to the kids. They'll crack up."

"Okay," he said. "I give up. What is it? What do you do here?"

"I'm not really the one who should tell you," Hillary said. "I just help out. You go ahead, look around. Judge for yourself."

She led him to the far side of the collection of buildings that comprised the village. Together they started down a gentle slope toward a thick growth of poplars. From beyond the trees Kettering heard the gurgle of running water and the laughter of young people.

Hillary took him to the crest of an embankment from where they could see past the trees. Below them lay a wide pool formed by the damming of a creek. The water in the pool was clear enough for him to see the small rocks on the bottom. Thirty or so young men and women swam and splashed and frolicked in the pool. All were naked. All seemed to be having a hell of a good time.

Kettering felt his ears grow warm, and he knew they were turning pink. He scanned the naked young flesh below looking for Trevor, trying not to let his eyes linger on private parts.

"Do you want to go down there and talk to Trevor?" Hillary asked.

"Why don't you go down and get him for me?" Kettering jerked a

thumb toward the village. "I'll wait back there."

The thin girl gave him an understanding smile, squeezed his hand, and tripped down the bank toward the pool. Kettering looked after her for a moment, then hurried back in the direction from which they had come.

He stopped at the edge of the camp buildings, where a cheerful young man was snatching up vagrant scraps of litter and dropping them into a green plastic trash bag.

The young man smiled at him.

"Hi," he said.

Kettering grunted a reply. The young man started off.

"Just a minute," Kettering called after him.

The young man turned back, sack in hand, still smiling.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. No secrets in Harmony Village."

"What do people do here?"

"Do?"

"I mean, is it some kind of religious thing? Or a New Age Shirley MacLaine trip? What's the bottom line? What keeps you kids here?"

"That's easy," the young man said. "Zoara Sol."

"The woman who runs the place?"

"Oh, she's more than just a woman. A lot more. Have you met her?"

"Not officially."

"Oh, well," the young man said, as though that explained Kettering's confusion. "When you've met Zoara Sol, that's all you need to know."

"I'll make it a point to meet her," Kettering said.

"She decides who she will meet. And when."

"What is she, some kind of a goddess?"

The young man suppressed a smile. "More than that. You'll see. If she chooses to meet you."

"I can't wait."

"I'm afraid you'll have to." The young man nodded, still smiling, and strolled across the lawn, pouncing eagerly on whatever scraps of paper he could find.

"Hello, Dad."

Kettering's head snapped around. The sudden sound of his son's voice startled him. He scowled to cover his momentary confusion. Trevor wore his usual battered jeans and a Spuds McKenzie sweatshirt. His hair was still wet.

"I, uh, your mother asked me to find you. She's in the hospital, you know."

"I heard."

"Oh?"

"Gabrielle told me."

"Oh."

"I hear she's going to be all right."

"I guess so. Don't you want to see her?"

"What for? I can't do her any good."

"She worries about you."

"Well, you can tell her to quit worrying. I'm fine."

Kettering scanned, the surrounding ridges with the jagged fringe of evergreens along the tops. He looked back abruptly at his son.

"Do you really like this?"

"Do I like what?"

Kettering waved an arm to encompass their surroundings. "All this. Living the rustic life. Chopping wood. Swimming coed in the nude."

"Why, does it threaten you?"

"I've never understood what that means."

"No, I guess not," Trevor said. "Did you enjoy watching the Baths?"

"Don't get smart-mouth."

"Dad, what did you come up here for?"

"I told you. Your mother asked me to find you."

"So you found me, okay?"

"My idea was to take you out of here."

"It won't work, you know. I'm eighteen. You could force me to go with you, but I'd just come back. This is where I belong. This is where it's happening."

"That's where I'm confused. What *is* happening here?"

"I can't explain it to you. You've got to feel it. You've got to feel *her*."

"Zoara Sol."

"Yes."

Trevor's face took on an expression Kettering had seen in hardcore dopers just as they shot up. He took a different approach.

"Who pays for all this?"

"Zoara Sol."

"And where does she get the money?"

"Dad, it isn't important. Here in Harmony we do what we want, feel the way we like, say anything, get along. Nobody cares about money. Nobody needs it."

"That's crap."

"That's the way it is."

"Don't you have to do anything to earn your keep?"

"We go into the city sometimes. Talk to other kids. A lot of them are lost, you know. One way or another. We tell them about Harmony."

"That's all?"

"I don't know. I haven't been here long enough to make one of the trips in yet."

"The idea is to get converts?"

Trevor's mouth turned down. "That's a bunch of Christian bullshit. We tell the truth."

Kettering leveled a forefinger at him. "Look - "

"I gotta go," Trevor said. "See you."

He turned his back and walked away, leaving Kettering feeling foolish with his finger pointing at empty air. He jammed his hand into his jacket pocket as though he were holstering a gun and trudged back through the cluster of buildings. Something, he was sure, was badly fucked up here in Harmony Village, and he resolved to find out what. But first he had other things on his mind. He headed for the field where he had left the Camaro.

"Mr. Kettering."

The voice was a soft contralto that seemed to caress the back of his

neck. He stopped and turned slowly.

Zoara Sol stood about fifteen feet away from him. She wore a tunic in earth-tone russet, belted at the waist with a green cord. Her pale smoky hair stirred in the light breeze. The silvery eyes looked right through Kettering's to the back of his brain.

He opened his mouth, but no words came. He had not felt this kind of weakness and giddiness in the presence of a female since puberty.

"I am Zoara Sol."

"I know," he got out.

"May I call you Brian? I like first names."

"Sure."

"I saw you talking to Trevor."

Kettering began to reassemble his thoughts. "Yes. He didn't have much to tell me. He was in a hurry to get back to the naked swimming party."

"You disapprove of nudity?"

"No. I kind of like it in certain situations. And I've got nothing morally against boys and girls taking their clothes off. But considering some of the diseases going around ..."

"You have nothing to worry about there. We are meticulous in our screening processes. No one with any suspicion of a taint enters Harmony Village."

"Very reassuring."

"That still sounds suspicious."

Without seeming to move, the woman had approached to within three feet of Kettering. Or had he walked toward her? He could not be sure.

He said, "I'm a policeman. I'm supposed to be suspicious."

"That's a shame. Tell me, what is there you would like to know?"

"More about you, for instance. All I know is you were mixed up with a sleaze named Enzo DuLac, and you're called Zoara Sol. Is that a real name?"

She smiled, showing small, even teeth. The lids lowered over her compelling silver eyes. "If you want to come with me, perhaps I can relieve some of your ... doubts."

Without waiting for his response, she turned and walked away toward one of the cabins on the rim of the clearing. Kettering felt as though some physical force pulled him along behind her. He was fascinated by the fluid movement of her buttocks under the tunic.

She climbed two wooden steps to the door of the cabin, opened it, turned and waited for him.

He hesitated a moment, looking around. The buildings of the village looked much more inviting. Almost fairy-tale friendly. An effect of the changing light?

Feeling unbearably clumsy, Kettering covered the distance between them, climbed the steps behind the woman, and followed her into the cabin. The interior was soft and warm in satins, furs, and nubby upholstered furniture. The air held a tantalizing hint of sandalwood.

Zoara Sol closed the door and crossed the room in front of him. The heat of her body warmed him as she passed. It took an effort to pull his eyes away from her to look around the cabin.

The windows were covered with gauzy curtains that allowed a soft diffused light to dapple the large single room. A low flame danced in a fireplace at the far end of the cabin. On a round wooden table was a basket filled with fresh fruit.

Zoara Sol walked slowly to a pale beige couch and sat down. The tunic slid up her thighs, revealing smooth, bare legs.

Watching him all the time with her steady silver gaze, she patted

the cushion next to her. Like a man moving through deep water, Kettering came to her and sat.

Chapter 26

The upholstery of the love seat was slippery and cool. Kettering felt awkward seated next to the poised, self-assured woman. The silver eyes never left him. A smile touched the corners of her pale pink mouth.

"Are you uncomfortable, Brian?" Her voice was soothing, like muted chimes.

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Tell me what I can do to put you at ease."

Kettering looked away until he got himself under control. Then he faced her again. He said, "You can cut out the B-movie dialogue, for a starter."

Zoara Sol laughed, the chimes rang up and down the scale. "You are a blunt man."

"Repartee is not one of my strong points."

"I'd like to know what is your strong point."

"Cut it out," he said, not really wanting her to.

"You came here looking for your son."

"I came to take him back with me."

"Anyone here is free to leave Harmony Village anytime. There are no locks. No guards."

"What do you call the guy in the muscle shirt out at the gate?"

"Bolo? He is our greeter."

"Uh-huh."

"I take it your son did not want to leave."

"He likes it here."

"Is that so hard to understand? Did you look around? Don't you approve?"

"I'm not sure what you have going here."

"Perhaps I can give you a clearer picture. Would you like something to drink?"

"No thanks."

Ignoring him, she rose gracefully from the love seat and walked to a cabinet built into the wall. "I'll bet you're a bourbon man."

"Good guess."

She took a bottle of Wild Turkey from the shelf, splashed some into an old-fashioned glass, added ice from a wood-grain bucket.

"It goes with the rest of the image," she said. "Strong, tough, macho. I'll bet you like to hunt and eat your steak rare."

"You're right about the steak, but I don't shoot unarmed animals."

"I'm glad to hear that."

She handed him the glass and sat down again. Her thigh brushed his. Kettering raised the glass to his lips, then set it down on an end table untasted.

"So what the hell *are* you doing here?"

"Just what you see. Providing an alternate life for young people. This generation has not been given much direction."

"That so?"

"Ask your son."

"He's not what you'd call real communicative with me."

"Hasn't that always been the way with fathers and sons?"

"The kids here seem to think of you as some kind of a goddess."

Zoara Sol did not laugh. She did not wave off the idea. She said, "How interesting."

"Yeah, isn't it."

"You don't think I'm a goddess, do you, Brian?" She leaned toward him. Sandalwood, subtle but insistent, filled his nostrils.

"I don't know what you are," he said.

"Woman would be a good place to begin."

"That much I can see."

"Want to see more?"

It was as though the next few seconds had been cut from the film of his life. Kettering had no sense of movement or conscious decision. His next flash of awareness, after Zoara Sol spoke, was holding the woman in his arms, her body molded against his, his mouth on hers while their tongues met and danced.

He opened his eyes and looked into the bottomless silvery pools of Zoara Sol. One cool hand played at the back of his neck. The other was at his belt line. Sandalwood and soft chimes.

Using all his willpower, and feeling an overwhelming pang of regret, he pulled away from her.

Zoara Sol released him without resistance and watched as he lurched to his feet. Pale hair floated about her head. The shadow smile touched her mouth.

"Excuse me," he said in a voice that was somebody else's. "I've got to

get back."

That, he thought, *had to be about the dumbest single line he had ever delivered.*

Still seated, Zoara Sol extended her hand. He touched her fingers and drew back as though they might burn him.

"Come again," she said, "when you can stay longer."

Kettering looked closely for any sign of mockery, but the woman gave no sign that she meant anything other than what she said.

He nodded, not trusting his voice, and left the cabin. Outside he gulped in the crisp mountain air. It had a sobering effect, and he was able to walk in a fairly steady gait to the clearing where he had left the Camaro.

Kettering settled himself behind the steering wheel still trying to shake off the feeling of weakness he had come away with. The sensation was like a lingering drunk, but he had left the glass of bourbon untouched on the end table where he set it down.

No, it was not drink, it was the woman herself. If Zoara Sol had this powerful an effect on him, a man who had been around a few corners, what must she do to the youngsters under her control?

And was it, after all, bad? All that had happened to him was that he was almost seduced into the bed of a beautiful woman. What would have happened if he had yielded to his instincts? God knows he wanted her. Wanted her so bad he ached. But something held him back. What?

He might have just walked away from a fuck that he would remember the rest of his life. Or ... or what? Despite the lingering sense of opportunity lost, Kettering had a deeper sense of having barely escaped something dark and sinister beyond his comprehension.

He leaned back in the seat and sucked in more of the evergreen air. Then he got businesslike and started the engine.

The gate was open and unattended as he drove through on the way out of Harmony Village. To keep his mind off the way Zoara Sol felt in his arms, Kettering concentrated fiercely on his driving.

The trees seemed to grow thicker and closer to the narrow road than he had noticed on the way up. The digital dashboard clock read *4:15*, but the shadows were heavier than they should be at that hour. A chill had set in. He left the window down to keep himself alert.

A fir branch swatted the windshield in front of Kettering's face, making him flinch. Another caught the radio antenna on the other side, bent it back, and set it twanging free. He did not remember the trees growing so low along the road.

Another branch reached out for him. The needles scratched his face through the open window.

What the hell?

The trees scraped both sides of the car now, slapping the roof, squealing across the glass. Kettering started to reach down to the console window controls. His hand would not come free of the steering wheel.

The wheel began to grow hot. Kettering jerked back in the seat. The muscles of his arms strained as he fought to pull his hands away. The skin of his palms was grafted to the steering wheel as the wheel grew hotter. He could smell the flesh starting to cook.

He slammed his right foot on the brake. The pedal sank to the floor without resistance. The car picked up speed, trees assaulting it on all sides. Kettering fought the blistering wheel to keep from slamming the Camaro into one of the monstrous trees that cavorted along the shoulders of the road, reaching out for him.

Abruptly the trees vanished. To his left, close enough to reach out and touch, if he could have let go of the steering wheel, was a cliff wall of blasted granite. To his right, seemingly inches beyond the spinning tires, was a sheer drop hundreds of feet to the canyon floor.

With brake and gas pedal inoperative, Kettering struggled with scorched hands to keep the Camaro on the twisting, plunging, single-lane road. Repeatedly the car banged against the raw outcroppings on the left, and several times lurched sickeningly toward the abyss on the right.

All of Kettering's concentration, through the pain of his charred hands and the panic of being trapped in the runaway car, was focused on keeping the vehicle on the road. If he could somehow manage to control it, eventually he would have to reach the highway. There, he knew, were emergency chutes angling up from the grade, for drivers of big rigs that lost their brakes. If he could hold his course that long, there was a chance.

Then the figure loomed ahead of him in the middle of the road. There was a straight stretch between the wall and the dropoff of thirty yards or so, and standing there blocking any possible passage was the creature that had dogged his life.

Doomstalker.

As the car bore down upon it, the thing seemed to grow. It expanded to twice, then three times the size of a man. The malformed head swung forward, the malignant face leered.

To jerk the steering wheel now would either send him crashing with explosive force into the rocky cliffside or plunging over the brink into the canyon. Death in every direction. He plunged on toward the face that now filled the windshield.

Instinctively Kettering tromped once more on the useless brake pedal. Miraculously, it caught. The power brakes grabbed, the tires bit into dirt. Kettering was flung helplessly about the front seat as the Camaro bucked and fishtailed and swerved into a full 360-degree spin. And stopped.

Slowly he opened his eyes. Every muscle of his body was cable-tense for the crash that had never come. Gradually, painfully, he willed his body to relax. The car was pointing down the hill. The cloud of dust raised by his skidding, whirling stop slowly settled. On the road in front of him stood ... nothing.

Carefully, finger by finger, he released his grasp on the steering wheel. The flesh of his hands was white with the pressure of his grip, but unbroken and unburned. The wheel was cool to the touch.

He cautiously tested the brake, the accelerator, the steering mechanism. Everything worked as it was supposed to. He opened the door and stepped shakily out onto the road. The left side of the car, which should have been dented and scraped from repeated collisions with the cliff, was unmarked. How had it escaped damage? Or had the crazy careening ride ever happened?

Kettering got back into the car. He sat for five minutes, breathing deeply, allowing the shaking of his hands to subside. Then he again started the engine and drove slowly, anxiously, down the mountain.

Chapter 27

Trevor Kettering stood at the edge of Harmony Village holding a towel and watched his father's Camaro roll out of the parking field and down the road toward the gate. He had, as always, a sense of frustration after talking with his father. Words unspoken, thoughts unvoiced, feelings unshared. It always seemed that just below the surface there was something the old man was trying to tell him. Something the boy wanted to say back.

Not that he expected any big hug and hair-tousling scene. That was strictly for TV sitcoms. Or, what the hell, maybe that was what he did want. Ho harm in wanting something, even a fantasy, as long as you knew it was a fantasy. So his father wasn't Ward Cleaver. Trevor wasn't exactly the Beav, either.

And come right down to it, his relationship with the old man was probably better than most. Some of the kids had real horror stories. At least Trevor's father had never beat on him. That was, if you didn't count some pretty stiff open-handed whacks on the butt when he was little. Trevor readily admitted he deserved those. Some of the other guys had fathers who went at them with fists or worse. One had shown Trevor burn scars on his palms where his *mother*, for Chrissake, had held his hands to the sandwich grill for swiping a six-pack from the cooler. Another had his jaw broken when the old man came home drunk and clobbered him just for the hell of it.

No, all things considered, Trevor had it pretty good with his father. His mom too, for that matter. It was plain she was into something weird right now, something with Gabrielle Wister that Trevor really didn't want to know about. But overall, she'd taken pretty good care of him and the old man. No, they were not your typical sitcom family, but better than most.

So, let's face the big question ... What the hell are you doing here? Harmony Village had seemed like a kicky adventure when they were all gathered around him at The Pit telling him how cool it was and what a great way to lose all the everyday shit kids had to put up with.

His first sight of the place had been a real downer. Nothing but trees and mountains and those crummy cabins. He was scheming to catch the next ride back down the hill. Then Zoara Sol walked out.

Zoara Sol. Never in his wildest jackoff fantasies had he thought something like her existed. He did not see how anybody could think straight when she was in the same room. And when she walked out to meet him and the other new kids coming to Harmony Village, the whole landscape changed. The sky, the mountains, the trees, the crummy cabins all of a sudden were beautiful. This was the place he had ached to be all his life. You could not then have dragged him back to the city with a tractor.

Now, standing alone at the edge of the rustic one-time Boy Scout camp, Trevor was again having doubts. The scenery was again too empty, the village too rustic.

He used the towel to scrub at his hair, still damp from the Baths. He began to wonder if it wasn't just a little bit chickenshit to run out on your parents when they were having a rough time? Not that he could have done anything about it, but he might have hung around just in case either of them wanted to talk. After all, they didn't run out on him the time the old liquor-store guy fingered him as one of a pair of armed robbers. It turned out to be some asshole who looked faintly like Trevor, but it helped to have his old man and his mom go to bat for him that time.

"Hey, you mad or something?"

Trevor started at the sound of the girl's voice. He turned to see Vicki standing behind him. She wore faded cut-off jeans and a tank top. She smiled quizzically.

"Uh, what?"

"I asked if you were mad. I looked for you after the Baths, but you left in such a hurry. I thought maybe you were pissed off about something."

"No, nothing like that," he said. "My dad was here. I just needed to think."

"I'll bet he wanted to take you away."

"Something like that."

"It's incredible how parents get all upset about what we're doing as soon as we leave the old homestead. While we're around they could care less."

"That's not exactly the way it was. He just ... wanted to know I was okay."

"Sure, that's what they all say." She frowned. "Hey, you're not thinking of letting them take you away now, are you?"

"Hey, nobody takes me anywhere. I go where I want to when I want to."

The girl took his hand. "I love it when you talk like that. Want to go back to your room?"

Trevor looked down the road where his father had driven away. He said, "Not right now, Vicki. I've got to sort some things out in my head."

"That sounds serious." Then, after a moment, "Oh, wow!"

Trevor turned back at her exclamation.

"Look at her, will you."

Coming toward them across the clearing, floating, it seemed, was Zoara Sol. She seemed to be surrounded by an aura of light. Trevor could feel the powerful attraction of the silver eyes even from that distance. Suddenly the trees, the sky, the mountains were poetry again.

Zoara Sol beckoned. Trevor and Vicki floated toward her.

***

Charity Moline came down to meet Kettering when he was halfway up the stairs to his one-room apartment. She stopped in front of him on the second-floor landing and put her hands on his shoulders.

"How did it go?"

"How do I look?"

"That bad?"

"That bad."

"Get inside. I'll fix you a drink and you can tell me about it."

He trudged across the floor and dropped onto the sofa. He could still feel the tension in his arms and shoulders from fighting the steering wheel during the wild ride down the mountain.

Charity disappeared into the kitchen alcove and returned in a minute with a dark amber glass of Wild Turkey and ice. She placed the glass in his hand and felt his brow.

"Poor baby, you're a little feverish."

He took a long swallow of the rich bourbon. "This will help," he said.

She sat down close to him and massaged the back of his neck with strong, cool fingers. "So, tell me what happened."

Kettering took a deep breath and began. He told Charity about the encounter with his son and the subsequent conversation with Zoara Sol, leaving out the more sensual parts of the latter.

She listened intently, easing away the tautness of his muscles. When he emptied his glass, she took it away and refilled it.

He wound up the story by telling her as best he could remember his

sensations as the car careered out of control down the mountain until the figure of the Doomstalker loomed in front of him.

"I hit the brakes, and this time they took hold. The car spun around and everything was gone. Nobody was in the road, my hands weren't burned, the wheel wasn't even hot. The car didn't have a scratch."

"What did it?" she said.

"I am damned if I know."

"Did you eat or drink anything? It sounds like a hallucinogenic reaction."

He shook his head. "She gave me a drink, but I didn't touch it."

Charity waited while he stared down into the glass. He swirled it to make a little whirlpool of bourbon.

"All I can tell you for sure is that it scared the shit out of me."

"So you're not utterly fearless."

"Not even slightly."

"I'm glad of that," she said. "It makes you more human."

"Oh, I'm plenty human," he said. "Maybe too much."

"You're a lucky human," Charity said. "You could have very easily gone over that cliff."

"Maybe it's not luck at all."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if this ... this Doomstalker wanted to kill me, that would have been a perfect time. Or half a dozen other times, for that matter. Look what it did to Al Diaz."

"Okay, so why not you?"

"You tell me."

"Let me take a guess. Maybe it's playing with you."

"Playing?"

"Punishing you. Getting even for ... who knows what."

"Well, whatever it's doing, I've learned one thing. I can't stop it."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. It's too strong for me. Maybe for anybody."

"Would your father have backed down?"

"He had the power of the Church going for him." Kettering closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as though he had a headache. "And he had something else."

"What?" Charity leaned toward him.

"Something ... Ah, the hell with it. I can't remember."

"So you're giving up?"

"What do you suggest I do? This ... Doomstalker can do anything it wants. It can be anywhere. It can get into your head. I can't fight it."

Charity pulled away from him. "Oh, that's great. That's wonderful. It's a damn good thing Al Diaz can't hear you now."

Kettering whirled on her. "What the hell do you know about it? Have you seen your family ripped apart and brain-blasted? Have you had a friend with his head twisted around backwards? Have you got this ... this thing from Hell dogging your footsteps, controlling your life?"

"No to all of the above," Charity said quietly. "But I did come close to getting barbecued in my own house, and I do have a big, dumb cop I care about who seems to be crumbling in front of my eyes. I do have some kind of a stake in this."

Kettering sighed and sat back. "Shit. I'm sorry. Having you hang with me through this has meant a lot. I guess I haven't told you that."

"No, you haven't."

"Okay, consider it said. So ... what next?"

"You're not quitting?"

"I can't. There's this tough redheaded broad who won't let me."

She reached up and kissed him. "That sounds more like my macho cop boyfriend."

"Okay, so we're back in business. Got any suggestions?"

Charity placed her fingertips on her lips and frowned in thought. After a minute she said, "Maybe ... no, that's probably not it."

"Maybe what?"

"A crazy idea."

"Let's hear it. I'll be the judge of how crazy it is."

"You said a minute ago that your father had the power of the Church and ... something else. What do you think that something else was?"

"I don't know. Everything I saw through the window that day is cloudy. I seem to remember Dad holding something in his hand when he died. But I can't clear up the picture in my mind."

"It could be the weapon we need, Kettering. Maybe you have it now but you don't know it. Maybe the other guy has to get it away from you so nobody else can use it."

Kettering stared at her.

She grinned sheepishly. "Ah, I told you it was crazy."

"Sure it is, but isn't everything? Go on."

"Well, your father used it and he won, didn't he?"

"My father died."

"Think back. You told me your father was inside arguing, fighting with somebody."

Kettering frowned, trying to remember.

"I heard the voices."

"You felt the threat of whatever it was."

"I was six years old."

"But you felt it. Your father was fighting against someone ... something. He had a weapon. You saw him hold it. What was it?"

"I don't know. I can't see it."

"Try, Brian."

Kettering leaned back and closed his eyes. He tried to force his mind back to the long-ago afternoon in Prescott, Indiana, and the front porch of his home. He could summon up again the angry voice of his father. And the other. He remembered being told about how his father was found lying dead. Near his feet an unexplained scattering of ashes. But whatever happened in that room was hidden. It was like a heavy curtain had been drawn forever across the window in his mind.

"It's no use," he said. "I can't remember."

"Try harder, dammit. It might be the difference."

"Don't you think I am trying? Christ, I've lived that day over so many times, awake and in nightmares, but I can never see clearly into that room. What the hell do you want from me?"

She turned toward him and lay a hand on his arm where the biceps bulged into a rigid knot.

"Hey, ease up. I'm on your side, remember?"

"Sorry."

They sat for a minute in silence.

"Can I make a suggestion?" Charity said at last.

"Could I stop you?"

"That doctor you told me about ... the one down at the Police Building?"

"Protius?"

"You said he wanted to try hypnosis."

"He said it was a possibility."

"Why don't you think about it?"

"Even if it worked on me, I don't see what good it would do. They use it for witnesses who get rattled. The idea is to help them - " He broke off.

"Yes?"

He spoke slowly and deliberately. "Help them remember what they saw."

"Well?"

"I don't even think I can be hypnotized."

"You can't know unless you try."

"Uh-huh."

"So will you try?"

"I'll think about it."

"God, you have got to be the most stubborn man I've ever met."

"Okay, I've thought about it."

"And?"

"And I'll try it."

Chapter 28

Clang!

The heavy square blade of the shovel bounced off the lopsided head of the Doomstalker.

It was an old-fashioned wooden-handled coal shovel, the kind people in the midwest used to load up their coal-burning furnaces. Brian took his best baseball grip on the handle and swung it again.

Clang!

Another direct hit on the side of the terrible Doomstalker head. And again no effect.

The Doomstalker smiled, a ghastly grimace of jagged teeth and blackened gums. He reached for Brian. The talons wriggled, each with a life of its own.

The coal shovel crumbled into dust in the boy's hands.

Riiiing.

"What the hell?"

Kettering sat up in the sofa bed, blinking away the remnants of the dream. Charity Moline stirred beside him.

"That's the telephone," she said.

"Right."

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

Shreds of the dream still clung to him like wisps of fiberglass. "Let

the machine get it."

Riiiing.

"It sounds important."

"Balls."

Kettering swung his feet out of bed and, sitting, reached for the telephone.

"Mr. Kettering?"

"Um."

"This is Tricia at Good Shepherd."

It took him a moment to clear away the dream and remember what the hell the Good Shepherd was. And why didn't anybody have last names anymore?

"Yeah," he said. "Hello."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that your sister is in bad shape."

"I know that."

"What I mean, Mr. Kettering, is that she's taken a turn for the worse."

"Yes?"

"Massive circulatory collapse."

"What does that mean?"

Tricia's voice turned unprofessionally snappish. "It means she's going to die."

"What's being done?"

"We're keeping her comfortable. That's as much as we can do."

"Yes, I see. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Good. She's asked for you."

"She what?"

"She wants to see you."

"Jessica said that? My sister spoke?"

"Mr. Kettering, at a time like this I am not inclined to make things up."

"My sister hasn't spoken for thirty years."

"Well, she spoke this morning. I think you'd better hurry if you want to see her."

"I will. Uh, thank you, Miss ..."

"Tricia."

"Tricia."

Kettering hung up the phone. He turned to see Charity sitting up in bed watching him quizzically.

"Your sister?" she said.

"She's dying."

"I'm sorry, Brian."

"They say she spoke. She asked to see me."

Charity swung out of the bed in a single fluid motion. "Well, let's get up there."

***

The morning was cold and gray and thick with mist when Kettering and Charity Moline arrived on the grounds of the Good Shepherd Convalescent Home. The Topatopa Mountains were invisible in the

gray murk, and today no one strolled the paths through the chilly grounds.

Inside the main building residents were being led back to their rooms after breakfast. There was a gray emptiness in the faces and a hint of puzzlement in the dim eyes that brought a pang of precognition to Kettering.

"It's hell to get old," Charity said softly.

"Yeah. The one incurable illness. The one sin society will not forgive."

They were greeted at the desk by the same gray-haired nurse with sad eyes who had met them here last time. Like the weather outside, she was melancholy and vaguely damp.

"I'm glad you came quickly," she said to Kettering. Her eyes flicked sideways at Charity.

"Miss Moline is a friend of the family," Kettering said, then was angry with himself for feeling he had to explain.

"I remember," said the nurse. "She was here with you last time."

She accompanied them as far as Jessica's room. "I'm afraid your sister doesn't have much time."

"I was told she spoke," Kettering said. "Asked for me."

"Yes. It was about three o'clock this morning when she had the attack. At first no one could understand what she was saying, her vocal cords had been unused for so long. When she made herself understood, we called you."

"What exactly did she say?"

"Your name. Your name and one more thing."

"What was that?"

"It was hard to make out, but it sounded something like 'baby.'"

Kettering and Charity exchanged a look as they reached the door to Jessica's room. The nurse opened the door for them.

"You go ahead," Charity said. "I'll wait."

"You might be able to help."

"No. If your sister has something to tell you, it might inhibit her if a stranger is there. I'll wait."

Kettering nodded. Charity gave his hand a squeeze, and he went into the room.

The curtain had been drawn to close off the middle bed. Jessica's two roommates looked at Kettering, then quickly looked away. The nurse pulled the curtain back on the overhead rail, and Kettering approached his sister.

Jessica looked smaller than the last time he had seen her. Near the head of the bed a cathode-ray tube monitored her heartbeat with spiky green blips on a black background. An IV tube was taped to a vein in the back of her hand.

With the bed cranked to a semisitting position, Jessica looked like a little girl with the covers pulled up to her chin. A very old little girl. The unlined flesh of her face was a gray color that matched the wedge of sky visible through the window. The outline of the skull was sharp beneath the skin.

The biggest difference in Jessica from the last time was her eyes. They were bright and feverish. And they looked directly at him.

The nurse moved off to a corner of the room while brother and sister faced each other.

"Hi, Jessie," he said.

The seconds ticked by with no sound from the woman on the bed other than her ragged breathing. Then the colorless lips twitched and rolled over the yellow teeth. Her tongue peeked out like a shy nocturnal animal. A rasping, creaking sound like old rusty hinges came from Jessica's mouth.

Kettering moved closer to the bed. He put his face down beside his sister's. Her breath was shallow and smelled heavily of medication.

"Br ... Bri ... Brian."

"I'm here, Jessie."

"Find it ... Brian."

"Tell me, Jessie. Find what?"

"Find ... the ... baby."

"Your baby."

"Yes. Danger."

"From the baby?"

The bony chest rose and fell. A little color returned to Jessica's face. When she spoke again her voice was a little smoother.

"It's not a baby."

"Yes, I know. He'd be grown up now."

"Not a natural baby. Not then ... not now. Find it, Brian."

"Where Jessie? Where can I find him?"

The woman in the bed rolled her head from side to side. Her eyes blinked rapidly, and for a moment Kettering thought he was going to lose her right there. The nurse took a step toward the bed.

"What is it, Jessie?" he said. "What can I do?"

"No!" The sudden strength in her voice startled him. The nurse stopped, looking alarmed.

"I don't understand you," Kettering said.

"The baby. Not ... not a boy."

"What? What are you saying?"

Jessica drew several more rattling breaths before she spoke again.

"My baby was not a boy."

Kettering stared at her.

"Not a boy," she repeated. "My baby was ... female."

"But - "

Kettering got no further as Jessica threw her head back against the pillow. Her mouth gaped open and she screamed. A terrible, broken, agonized scream to make up for thirty years of silence.

The nurse rushed to the bedside as Kettering stepped back, his hands moving anxiously, uselessly.

Jessica's scream died. Her face collapsed in on itself, her head fell to one side.

The Murse threw back the covers and thumped on Jessica's frail chest. The monitoring equipment subsided to a high-pitched *beeeeeep*.

Feeling helpless, Kettering stepped back away from the bed. At a sound from the doorway he turned to see Charity standing there. Her face was white, her eyes staring.

"The scream," she said. "What happened?"

Kettering could only shake his head.

An Oriental in a white jacket rushed into the room closely followed by another nurse. They brushed past Charity and Kettering and joined the gray-haired nurse at the bedside.

After a moment the gray-haired nurse stepped back. She turned to face Kettering. Her eyes told him the story.

"She's gone?" he said.

The nurse nodded. "It's good you got here in time."

"Sure." Kettering's jaw tightened. "In time."

***

Kettering was silent as he drove west from Ojai, then down the Ventura Freeway toward Los Angeles. Charity Moline let her hand rest lightly on his thigh. Every few miles she looked over at him.

"Stupid," he said as they rolled through the hills north of the San Fernando Valley. "I have been so fucking stupid."

Charity gazed out the window and said nothing.

"Elemental law of detection - do not assume facts not in evidence. I have assumed for thirty years that my sister gave birth to a boy. I've been looking for a thirty-year-old man who would be that boy today. Doomstalker. Now I find out it was a girl."

"You couldn't have known," Charity said. "All the records back in your hometown were destroyed. Nobody remembered. All you had was a name."

"Dorcas," Kettering said through his teeth.

"And that could as well be a girl as a boy. It sounds Greek. You couldn't have known."

"That's the problem," Kettering said. "I *didn't* know. But I went barging ahead just as though I did. I rousted Enzo DuLac all over the lot because I thought he might be it. I wanted him to be it. He's the right age, but it turns out he's the wrong gender."

"But when you've seen it ... didn't you tell me it looked like a man?"

"I was assuming again. It's big, it's humanoid, it's powerful. You want to call it something, so you call it 'he.' It's only an image, anyway. An evil, ugly image, but sexless. Whatever part of the Doomstalker is mortal lives in the child born to my sister. The female child."

Kettering slowed the car. He turned in the seat and looked at Charity.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"The woman at Harmony Village."

"Zoara Sol," he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Go after her."

"Aren't you doing it again? Making an unjustified assumption?"

"Maybe. I don't think so. She fits."

"There's something else you ought to think about."

"I'm listening."

"Say you do go after this woman and you confront her, and say she *does* turn out to be your Doomstalker. What do you do then? You've seen what you're up against by what it did to Al Diaz and to your wife. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I'll have to."

"But maybe not with your bare fists. Or your gun either."

"Meaning?"

"Remember what we were talking about last night?"

"About my father."

"And the weapon he used."

"But I don't remember."

"Maybe you will under hypnosis. You said you were ready to try."

They drove on a mile in silence before Kettering spoke again.

"Let's do it."

Chapter 29

The closer they got to the Police Building, the more nervous Kettering became. In his years as a cop he had been in more life-threatening situations than he could remember, but he had the ability to shift into an emotional neutral so he functioned coolly at the time. Only afterwards, when he started thinking about what might have happened, did the tremors show up.

The only time he got nervous, when his jaw muscles tightened and his armpits sweat, was when he had to go to the dentist.

Or now.

"Maybe we ought to wait until tomorrow," he said when they parked in the police lot. "Go at it in the morning when I'm fresh."

Charity gave him a look.

"He might not be here."

"We'll find him."

"Or maybe he's busy."

"We'll wait."

"Okay, okay," he said. "Let's go."

They entered at the rear of the Police Building and headed for Dr. Protius's office. Lieutenant Ivory came out of a door in their path. Kettering looked around quickly, but there was no time to duck out of the way.

The lieutenant's glance passed over Charity without a change in his expression. He faced Kettering.

"Sorry to hear about Mavis," he said. "How's she doing?"

"Better," Kettering said.

"Were you on your way to see me?"

"No, as a matter of fact we're looking for Doc Protius." Kettering was annoyed with the embarrassment he felt at confessing a visit to the department shrink.

"Good idea," Ivory said. "By the way, your suspension's lifted. When you coming back to work?"

"Soon," Kettering said.

"Glad to hear it. Let me know if there's anything I can do to speed your return." He gave Charity a perfunctory nod and continued past them down the hallway.

"He doesn't like me," Charity said.

"Why should he? He's a cop, you're a reporter."

"Thanks a lot."

"That's the way life is."

They found Dr. Protius in his office, comfortably seated in one of the creaky leather chairs, reading a yachting magazine. He stood up when they entered and laid the magazine aside.

"Brian, glad to see you."

"If you're busy, I could come back."

"Just indulging in a little fantasy." His smile included Charity.

"Do you two know each other?" Kettering said.

"I've seen the lady on television," said Protius.

"I'm not working now," Charity explained.

"Nice to meet you nonprofessionally." Protius offered his hand. Charity took it.

The doctor walked over and sat on the edge of his desk. He folded his arms and waited.

"I guess you'd like to know why I'm here," Kettering said.

"I'll admit I'm a little curious."

"You know that hypnotism business we talked about?"

"I remember."

"Well, I've been thinking about it, and I might be ready to try it."

"He *is* ready to try it," Charity amended.

"Let's talk about it," Protius said. "Tell me what you'd like to accomplish."

Feeling a little foolish, Kettering told the psychiatrist what he hoped to bring up out of his childhood memory. As he talked, he felt his nerves begin to loosen just a little.

Protius nodded from time to time and walked back to sit behind the desk. He took notes as he listened.

When Kettering paused for a moment, he said, "You were six years old at the time all this happened?"

"That's right. Most of that day is as clear in my memory as if it were yesterday. All except the details of what happened inside the room with my father and ... whoever was with him. That's where I kind of blank out."

"And that's the part you want to see?"

"If you can do it."

"Hey, you're the one who's going to do it. If there's something stuck in your memory, you are the one who will have to dig it out. All I

am is a guide."

"All right, you can skip the disclaimers. When will you have time to do it?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"You mean right now?"

"Any reason why not?"

Kettering could not think of one.

"Do you want me to leave?" Charity asked.

"You're not going to make me do anything disgusting, are you, Doc?"

"Kettering - " he began.

"Only kidding." He turned to Charity. "You bought into the whole game, so you might as well stay and watch."

She touched his hand lightly and moved off to a straight-backed chair by the door. "I'll sit over here out of the way."

Dr. Protius adjusted the curtains to dim the light in the room. "Go ahead and sit down, Brian. Get comfortable."

"Have you got one of those endless spiral things for me to stare at?"

"I've got one. I also have a nice crystal on a chain that catches the light as I swing it back and forth, back and forth like a pendulum."

Kettering caught himself following the movement of Protius's hand and forced his attention back to the doctor's face.

"But I don't think we'll use any of that stuff." He looked around the room. "If you want to focus on something, try that picture on the wall you're facing ... the one with the three-masted schooner."

Kettering leaned back and looked at the picture. Wind filled the sails as the boat rode high on a choppy sea. White puffy clouds

floated in a bright blue sky.

Protius said. "A nice print. One of my personal favorites. Just off the bow, a little above it, there's a sea gull. See it?"

"Mm-hmm."

"It's a nice restful, relaxed-looking bird. Sailing comfortably along on the breeze. Why don't you concentrate on that. Take a deep breath, all the way in. Let it out slowly. Good. Another."

Kettering breathed deeply, keeping his eyes on the painted sea gull. "That's all? I just watch the birdie and breathe?"

"That's about it. Relax and get comfortable. Move around if you want to."

"What do you do?"

"I just sit here and talk. You can listen to my voice and watch the sea gull. Watch it floating there, motionless, floating on nothing. Put yourself in the picture there with the sea gull and listen to my voice."

Kettering sat back in the soft, yielding leather and thought, *He's not going to be able to do this. No way I'm going under.*

But he figured he might as well cooperate as long as he was here. So he concentrated on the sea gull, and he listened to Protius's voice, and pretty soon he realized he was feeling all nice and comfortable and, for the first time in many days, really relaxed.

"Relaxed," echoed the doctor's voice. "And comfortable. You are so relaxed, and so comfortable. Like the sea gull. Floating. Floating easily and effortlessly. You can close your eyes if you want to. They may be a little heavy. You can close your eyes, but you will still see the gull, and you will still hear my voice."

As a matter of fact, Kettering's eyelids were feeling heavy. It felt good to close them for a minute. He knew he could open them again anytime he wanted to, but just for a minute it felt good.

"You *can* still see the gull," Protius droned. "You can be there with the gull. Floating on nothing, held aloft by the warm, gentle wind. A wind that carries you softly, safely, comfortably back. Back through time. Back through the years. Back. Back."

I might as well go along with it, Kettering thought. *It can't do any harm.* And in truth, it did almost seem as though he had moved into the picture with the gull. He felt very comfortable and very relaxed. And the wind was warm and gentle. And it carried him back.

It was pleasant, pleasant and relaxing to contemplate the scenes of his past. Sure, Kettering knew what was happening. Dr. Protius was gently suggesting what he should see. The good times and the good feelings.

There was the friendship with his fellow police officers, a special bond that civilians could never know. There were the times in his marriage, few though they might have been, when he and Mavis were happy and seemingly in sync. He felt again the pride he had known when Trevor as a high school freshman came home with all A's on his report card. And when he won his letter in track. Never mind the other stuff, the arguments, the bad scenes. Dr. Protius guided him past those to the happy times. Kettering was willing enough to go along.

There were quick cuts going further back, like a reversed movie montage, of the excitement of his arrival in California, some of the remembered good days when he was starting out with the Columbus police force. Graduation from OSU, and his undergraduate days kidding around in the fraternity. A couple of special dates with his first girlfriend as a teenager, when he lived with Aunt Alice in Milwaukee.

Dr. Protius carried him quickly over the darkness of the last years with his mother and sister in Prescott, and finally brought him to the summer afternoon of the church picnic, the bike ride home, and what happened there.

"You remember parking your bike out in front of the house."

"Yes."

"And you climbed up on the porch," said Dr. Protius in his deep, restful voice.

"I remember." He did too. Vividly. He could almost hear the creak of the third step - the one his father never did get around to fixing.

"You are there now, Brian. You are six years old. You are on the porch of your parents' home on Bailey Street in Prescott."

Kettering knew where he was, of course. He was sitting in a chair in the office of Dr. Edmund Protius of the West Valley Police Department. And he sure as hell was not six years old. He was ... he was ... well, what did it matter? It was easy enough to go along with the doctor's voice.

The boards of the porch were clearly definable through the soles of his Keds. He would be due for a new pair soon. It seemed that by the time he got a new pair broken in, the soles were wearing thin.

"You hear the voices, Brian. The voices of your father and the other man." Dr. Protius must have moved his chair. He sounded a lot farther away. And growing fainter.

Much louder were the voices of Reverend Kettering and the pizza man. There was anger, curses, threats. Brian squirmed uncomfortably in the leather chair as the boy squirmed there on the porch of his home.

"Look in the window, Brian."

"No."

"Nothing can hurt you. You're safe now. You know you're safe, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Look in the window."

He looked. His father, lean and gangly, stood facing ... Mr. Riggio. The pizza man.

But the Mr. Riggio Brian saw now as he peered through the window into his front room was not the laughing, friendly man the kids all liked. The pizza man looked dark and dangerous. No hint of a smile showed in his flashing eyes and bared teeth. He and Reverend Kettering faced each other with a passion that raised goose bumps on the boy's flesh.

Brian ducked down below the windowsill, where he could not be seen from inside, and listened.

The voices. His father's, and the other, which now had a face.

"I know who you are," his father was saying.

"You're bluffing," Riggio said in a low rumble.

"I have suspected for a long time, and now I have proof."

"You're crazy, preacher. You've been listening to your own sermons."

The Reverend Kettering continued as though the other man had not spoken. "I know who you are and where you come from. I know why you are here. It's the children. You're here to take our children. Steal their souls."

"That's Sunday School talk. God's bullshit."

"It's reality."

The voice of the pizza man deepened even more. The pauses between his words crackled with unspoken threats.

"Suppose you are right. Suppose your crazy Bible-thumping ideas about me are right. Where does that leave you? What do you think you're going to do about it, preacher?"

Shivering with excitement, Brian cautiously raised his head to peek into the living room again. He saw his father push the glasses back up on his narrow nose in a gesture Brian had seen a thousand times. The Reverend Kettering, though not a husky man, was tall, and in Brian's mind his father had always been as big as anybody. Now the

size difference between him and the black-browed pizza man made him look puny.

"I am going to destroy you," said his father.

Riggio laughed, not the friendly ho-ho-ho he used at the House of Pizza, but a deep, ugly bark with no humor in it.

"You have no more chance than - what's the saying? - a snowball in Hell. I only wish I could be there to see you stand before your little flock and tell them to their sheep faces that a fiend from the abyss walks among them, right here in Prescott, Indiana."

Riggio broke off into his barking laugh, then continued. "What do you think their reaction will be? These fine, middle-American, God-fearing Christian Republicans don't want to hear that. They want to hear you tell them comfortable lies about the lovely afterlife that awaits them, as long as they are generous when the Sunday collection plate comes around. You start giving them hellfire and brimstone and they'll laugh you out of your own church. They'll have you put away."

Kettering shook his head. "You didn't hear me. I did not say I will expose you. I know better than to try to convince people now that you are what you are. No, I said I will *destroy* you."

As Riggio growled a reply, something moved just at the edge of Brian's vision. He turned quickly and saw, or thought he saw something. A man? Something. High, hunched shoulders, long, dangling arms with talons for fingers. It was there for an instant and it was gone. But in that instant, before six-year-old Brian Kettering turned back to the drama playing out in his living room, the faceless, menacing image burned itself into his memory.

Deep in the boy's mind, it already had a name.

Doomstalker.

Chapter 30

The scene swam before the boy's eyes. The man's muscles tensed. He was cold, then hot, then cold again.

The soothing voice of Dr. Protius: "It's all right, Brian. You're safe. You're in my office. Relaxed and comfortable. Deep breaths. Nothing can reach you now. You know exactly where you are. You can remember everything we've been doing. Anytime you want to come back, you can. Nothing is holding you. We will continue only if you want to."

Kettering pulled oxygen deep into his lungs, held it, let it out. He felt his muscles loosen up, his nerves slacken. He was in control. He said, "Yes, let's do it all."

"Good. Now you're going to go back there. Back to your house on Bailey Street. You are a little boy again. You are six years old, kneeling on your porch, listening to the voices inside. Can you hear them now, Brian?"

The man nodded. The little boy heard.

The voices of his father and Mr. Riggio seemed to crackle and boom with the tension of the moment.

"You're finished here," said the Reverend Kettering.

"Don't be foolish," Riggio answered. "You can't hurt me."

"I have the weapon that will destroy you."

Riggio's laugh was an ugly rumble. "There is no such weapon. Not on this earth."

"There is," said Kettering, "for one who knows how to use it. And I

know."

"You would not attack me with a gun or a knife. You are not that stupid."

"No, I am not. I would not fight you as I would a man."

A rumbling laugh. "Surely you are not going to brandish a crucifix. Even you must know the folly of that old myth."

"No, not a crucifix. The power of the Christian cross is great, and I respect it. I also know its limitations, and that the strength of your evil comes from a more ancient source."

"More ancient and more powerful than anything you can use against me."

"Perhaps not. My weapon is ancient too. It came into my possession years ago, before I truly understood its power."

Brian rose cautiously from his crouch and peered over the windowsill. His father, dressed in the warm-up jacket and chinos he had worn to the picnic, was holding something in his right hand, down below the boy's line of vision.

"You are all talk, preacher. Where is this weapon?"

The Reverend Kettering raised his right arm. Whatever he held was still out of sight.

"Here," he said.

The thick lips of the pizza man twisted into an ugly grimace.

"That does not even belong to your religion."

"It belongs to a faith more ancient than mine. In the timeless struggle against you and your master, all religions are one."

"You are a fool! Religions are myths and fairy tales. Your own as much as the others. Mine is the true power, as any study of history will tell you. Now give me that toy."

"Never."

"Hand it over. It is useless to you. Give it to me and perhaps we can strike some bargain, as reasonable men have done with me since the dawn of time."

"I know better. And you *know* that I do. It is I who have the power now. And I will use it."

Brian could not understand his father talking in the formal cadences of the pulpit on this sunny Saturday morning. He shifted his position on the porch so he could see more clearly what was going on inside.

The transformation in Mr. Riggio was staggering. Gone was the fat, smiling pizza man. In his place loomed a tall stranger with high, powerful shoulders. His arms hung down to his knees. At the end of his hands, where there should have been fingers, were cruel, curved talons. Unearthly fires burned in his eyes. The flesh of his face was splotched with angry crimson.

Brian saw the sudden movement as the menacing stranger reached out toward his father.

The Reverend Kettering's reaction was startlingly quick and catlike. He sidestepped and shot his right arm straight out at the other man. Clenched in his fist was ... something ... something all blurry in the sunlight that filtered in through the window. Kneeling outside, Brian cocked his head and squinted. The object seemed to be made of a polished red material and was about the size of a Coke bottle. Try as he might, Brian could not make out any details.

Kettering took a step toward the larger man, and for a moment Brian feared one or the other would turn toward the window and see him. He ducked down again below the sill and crouched there, listening.

"You fool!" The snarling voice of Mr. Riggio was like a whiplash. "You utter fool! Don't you know this is a fight you cannot win? Even if you banish me, sooner or later I will return in one guise or another. You will succeed only in destroying yourself."

"Do you, think I fear for my own life?"

"If not, then what of your family? The woman, the boy. The little girl. And their children in years to come. They will suffer torments for your self-righteous wrath long after you are gone. This I promise you. Think about what you are doing, preacher."

"Be damned!" thundered the Reverend Kettering in his most powerful pulpit voice. "In the name of the Christian God and all the honorable gods in all the religions of the world since time began, I consign you now and forever to the fires of Hell!"

Brian longed to stand up and look, but the fury of the men inside was a palpable force keeping him down and out of sight.

There was a long moment of charged silence, then his father spoke one more sentence. He spoke in a voice solemn as the tomb and in words of no language young Brian had ever heard. Strange-sounding, alien words that burned themselves forever into some dark recess of the boy's mind.

The incantation was cut off abruptly. From inside the house Brian heard a shout, a strangled cry, and the thump of a body hitting the floor.

The cry, unmistakably from the throat of his father, released Brian from his paralysis. He lurched upright and ran, stumbling, to the front door. After a moment fumbling with the latch, he flung open the door and rushed in.

Pale ribbons of brown smoke floated in the room. To the boy's nostrils came a sharp scent of something burned. Something foul. His father lay facedown on the floor, his right hand still clutching ... something. The fingers clamped tight around it, tendons in his wrist straining even in death.

No trace remained of Franco Riggio, the pizza man; only a scattering of pale ashes and an irregular scorched spot on the carpet.

With some difficulty Brian rolled Harlan Kettering over onto his

back. Even to the eyes of a six-year-old boy, the minister was unquestionably dead. The strong, gaunt face was unnaturally pale. While the expression was tranquil, there was a tightness around the mouth that showed the strain of his last moments of life. But it was the eyes that most clearly reflected death. They were open and empty, and they looked up at and through young Brian Kettering. As the boy watched, the eyes of his father slowly closed.

He was back out on the porch, feeling dizzy, like the time at recess that his friend Billy Riddell showed him how to press a vein on the side of your neck and you'd pass out.

He never felt it when his head hit the boards.

"It's all right, Brian," said Dr. Protius. "You're feeling fine. You can see clearly. Nothing can hurt you. You can look in that window now and you can see what was hidden from you before. You can see anything you want. Go and look, Brian. Look in the window again."

The boy rose from the porch, walked back and looked. His father stood again facing the transformed Mr. Riggio. His right arm was held straight out, his hand gripped something ... something made of polished red stone. Energy pulsed from the object his father held. The pizza man cowered back from it. His face began to change color.

The voice of Dr. Protius: "What do you see, Brian?"

"My father."

"What is he doing?"

"He's fighting with the pizza man. And he's holding something in his hand. Holding it out in front of him." Kettering felt his own arm raise in a thirty-years-later imitation of the gesture.

"What is he holding?"

The sun glinted from the polished surface, making the boy on the porch shade his eyes.

"I ... I can't tell. It makes my eyes hurt."

The muscles in Kettering's arm began to jump.

"Relax, Brian. You can put your arm down now. You're feeling very relaxed. Very comfortable."

And so he was. How could Doc Protius always tell what he was feeling?

"You are still on the porch, Brian. Still six years old."

No he wasn't, but if Doc Protius wanted to pretend, he would go along with it.

"What is happening now, Brian?"

"I don't know. I'm scrunched down where I can't see. I hear a noise inside, like a bang. I hear my dad yell."

"Do you go into the house now, Brian?"

"Yes. I go in."

"What do you see?"

"I see my dad lying on the floor."

"Where is the other man?"

"I don't know. Mr. Riggio is gone. There's just some ashes on the rug."

"What do you do?"

"I ... I take it out of my dad's hand."

"You take what, Brian?"

"The thing. The red stone thing he used to burn Mr. Riggio."

"What does it look like? The thing you took from your dad's hand?"

"It ... it ... I don't know. It has kind of a face. A long nose like a fox. Pointy ears. It's a man, but not a man." Kettering twisted in the

chair.

"What do you do with it?"

"I take it with me in my pocket. Later I put it in my box of toys. Down in the bottom where nobody will find it."

"You never told anyone about it?"

"No. It was my dad's. It was secret."

"And after that did you ever take it out of the box to look at it or anything?"

"No, I never."

"You never saw it again?"

"I never looked."

There was a silence. Then Dr. Protius said, "All right, Brian, that's good. That's a very good job. Now you're going to come back. Gently, softly, like the sea gull, you are floating back here to us. You are going to remember everything that happened. Everything we talked about. Will you remember, Brian?"

"I'll remember."

"I'm going to count to five now, and when I get to five you are going to be wide awake, feeling fine. Very refreshed. One. Two. Starting to awaken now. Three. A little more. Four. Almost awake now. Feeling fine. Feeling rested. Refreshed and ready to go. Five."

Kettering grinned at the print of the schooner with the sea gull just over the bow. He looked over at Charity, who smiled back encouragingly. He turned toward the desk where Dr. Protius sat cleaning his nails with a letter opener.

"Doc, you're all right. That didn't hurt a bit."

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Rested. Like I just had a good night's sleep."

"And do you remember everything we did?"

Kettering grew serious. "Yes. Sure. Why wouldn't I? Like you said, I wasn't really asleep. I never went under."

"Of course you didn't. Maybe you'll spread the word now that I don't really do magic tricks down here."

"I'll do a testimonial if you want, Doc." He turned back to Charity, who still sat over by the far wall. "Did you hear all that?"

She was excited. "I heard. The toy box."

"That's where I put it. That's probably where it still is."

"Have you any idea where that box is now?"

"Unless my aunt Alice has changed a whole lot from the time when I lived with her, I know exactly where it is."

Charity leaned forward. Dr. Protius put down the letter opener. They looked at Kettering.

"The toy box, and whatever I put in the bottom of it, is in Milwaukee in my aunt Alice's attic."

Chapter 31

Rain made horizontal wet streaks on the window of the DC-10 as the plane began its descent to Mitchell Field. Down below, Milwaukee looked gray and desolate under the rain.

As a Californian of fifteen years residence, Kettering had little tolerance for rain. It baffled him how people in other parts of the country could carry on their everyday lives while under water so much of the time. Nevertheless, given a choice between standing naked on the ground in a downpour and flying in a luxury jet under ideal conditions, he would have chosen to plant his feet on earth. Flying was not one of the things he did well.

Charity reached over from the adjacent seat and touched his hand. "Almost there."

"'Almost' doesn't count," he said through clenched teeth. "As in 'General Custer almost got away at Little Bighorn.' Or 'The *Titanic* almost missed the iceberg.'" He continued to stare at this rain-distorted view of the wet landscape below.

The big jet eased in over the runway, the tires banged the asphalt in touchdown. The huge engines roared with reverse thrust and slowed the plane, which began taxiing toward the terminal.

Gradually Kettering released his grip on the padded armrests.

"You'll never make the Frequent Flyer Club," Charity told him.

"Not if I can help it," he said.

They walked together through the collapsible tunnel into the terminal. Kettering felt displaced among the local people who were meeting planes, buckled into their rain gear. He had left his only

raincoat at home buried deep in the back of the closet.

Charity went into the gift shop to buy one of the clear plastic coats that come in compact envelopes, into which they can never again be made to fit. Kettering passed. He said he did not intend to be out in the weather long enough to get wet.

They rented a car at the Hertz counter and waited outside under cover until the van driver pulled up to take them to the lot. Kettering turned up his collar against the wet wind. The sky, dark as a bruise, pressed down heavily.

Before they had gone far, Kettering had to pull off the interstate and consult the Milwaukee street map provided by Hertz.

"I thought I'd remember the way to Aunt Alice's," he said, "but things change. Landmarks, buildings, freeways."

"And people," Charity added.

"Sometimes."

He put the map away and drove slowly, the windshield wipers keeping a somber rhythm with the weather outside. Thunder growled over Lake Michigan.

"Sounds like we're in for a storm."

"This isn't a storm?" Charity said.

"Not in Milwaukee it isn't. Not yet."

Kettering drove carefully, slowing almost to a stop at intersections to read street signs. Beside him Charity sat with her hands folded.

"Tell me about your Aunt Alice," she said.

"I haven't seen her for ten years," Kettering said. "She was my mother's older sister. Eleven years older. That would make her eighty, eighty-five now. Something like that."

"I mean what kind of a woman is she?"

"She was good to me when I came to live with her. It couldn't have been easy. She was fifty-something then, and widowed. I was still messed up mentally from the accident that killed my mother, and I was probably a handful for her. I thought she was too strict with me at the time, but what kid doesn't think that?"

"She never married again?"

"Nope. Still lives alone in the big old house on North Forty-first Street. I get a lively letter from her every Christmas. But I don't know how much longer she'll be able to manage by herself."

Charity was thoughtful for several blocks.

"Maybe you ought to drop me at a motel or something," she said. "Go on by yourself."

"What would I want to do that for?"

"When you called your aunt from Los Angeles you didn't tell her you were bringing somebody."

"She didn't ask."

"Do you think it's a good idea to surprise her?"

"I don't see where it makes any difference. We're not moving in with her."

"I'm just thinking it might go smoother if you showed up alone."

"Why would it?"

"You wouldn't have to explain me, for one thing. I mean, Aunt Alice doesn't know anything about what's happening with you or your marriage, does she?"

"I didn't bring it up."

"And this being the midwest and all, she might not be real happy about you traveling with a strange woman."

"Hey, the midwest is not all Hickville, you know. They have X-rated movies and massage parlors and cocaine. People even get divorced here now and then."

"Yes, I know, but you're kind of like a son to this woman."

"I'm also forty-three years old. I'm allowed to cross the street alone."

"All right," Charity said, "but if Aunt Alice freezes up, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Anyway, every time I go somewhere without you, something bad happens."

She gave him a gentle squeeze on the thigh and they drove on through the rain.

The house on North Forty-first Street where Alice Ulrich lived, where young Brian Kettering had spent his adolescent years, was more than seventy years old, as were the others along the block. It was gray clapboard, two stories high, with an attic and a basement. The windows were small, the porch was wide with hooks in the overhead beam from which a swing once hung. In the front yard was a huge, sickly elm tree.

Kettering parked the rental car on the street and sat for a long minute looking at the old house through the rain.

"Bring back memories?" Charity said.

"Not so much. Memory is an off and on thing for me. Always has been since I got my head crunched in the accident."

"Do you have to talk that way? "

"What way?"

"Like a bad Bogart imitation."

"That was supposed to be John Wayne."

They exchanged a smile, but neither was convincing.

"We might as well go in," he said.

A peal of thunder, louder now, sped them through the slanting rain to the shelter of the front porch. Kettering wiped at the water on his shoulders. Charity shook droplets from the plastic raincoat.

The door bell was an old-fashioned black iron key set in the center of the door. Kettering gave it a twist. A grinding ring sounded on the other side.

The woman who opened the door was smaller than the Aunt Alice Kettering remembered. Much smaller. She came barely to his breastbone. Her hair was white, her face pale, her forehead marked with brown age spots. The eyes behind the bifocals were still bright blue and alive. She looked at the man and woman for a moment without a sign of recognition.

"Hi, Aunt Alice. It's me, Brian."

"I know who it is. I'm not senile."

"This is Charity Moline. She's a friend."

The old woman gave Charity a quick frisk with her eyes. She did not smile.

"Hello."

"Nice to meet you," Charity said.

"You might as well come in out of the wet," Aunt Alice said.

The old woman turned and led the way. Charity dug an elbow into Kettering's ribs and gave him a what'd-I-tell-you look. Kettering frowned at her, wiped his feet, and followed his aunt into the parlor.

Aunt Alice directed them to chairs. There they sat among the geegaws and bric-a-brac that collect in old houses. The detritus of a lifetime. Surrounded by the familiar furnishings, Kettering felt thirteen years old again. He loosened his collar so he could breathe.

While Kettering fidgeted and Charity Moline sat quietly, Aunt Alice went to the kitchen and returned with a platter of oatmeal cookies and a pot of coffee. Midwestern custom demanded that you not launch into your business until the host has provided food.

As soon as they had all bitten into their cookies and sipped at the coffee, Kettering said, "Did you check to make sure the box was still here? The one I asked you about?"

"Didn't have to," Aunt Alice said. "Like I told you on the phone, nothing's been taken out of that attic since Eisenhower was president. Plenty of stuff been put in, but nothing taken out. That box will be right where it was set down when you came to live here."

"Okay if we go up and take a look?"

"That's what you came for, isn't it?"

"Well ... yes." The old woman's directness was unsettling.

Kettering forced himself to sit still while he ate another cookie and finished his coffee. Then, followed by Charity and his aunt, he led the way up the narrow stairs to the second floor of the old house.

He paused at the end of the hall and passed his hand over the painted wood of one of the doors.

"Your old room," Aunt Alice confirmed. "I rented it out for a while, to a couple of nice college boys, so I thought. Turned out they were doing nasty things with each other up here. Haven't used the room since."

Opposite Kettering's old room was a smaller door. He opened it onto a dark, narrow flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs that led to the attic. He flicked a wall switch and a bare, low-wattage bulb blinked on above them.

Kettering shivered at the damp cold beyond the door. He looked back at Charity.

"There's no heat up here," Aunt Alice said. "No need for it."

"Ready to go up?" Kettering said.

Charity rubbed her arms for warmth. "This is what we came for," she said.

He climbed the steep, splintery stairs. The odor of mildew and old clothes was thick in the cold air. Rain pounded the roof just over their heads.

Aunt Alice was the last one up the stairs. She said, "The box you're after will be over along the far wall, behind everything else."

Bending low to avoid hitting his head on the roof beams, Kettering crossed the gritty wooden floor to the jumble of rags, cartons, papers, and old broken furniture his aunt had pointed out. With a last look at Charity he began pulling the debris out of the way.

It, was twenty minutes later that he uncovered the old cardboard carton with MOTOROLA printed on the sides. The corners were mashed in, the top sealed with tape, but the box was intact. It had originally contained a table-model radio that his parents kept in their bedroom. A big Philco stood in the living room. The family's first television had been a couple of years away.

A flash of lightning outside threw a momentary blue-white light into the cramped space of the attic. In seconds it was followed by the boom of thunder.

Kettering stripped away the tape sealing the box and sat down cross-legged on the floor. Item by item he began taking out the contents.

There was an Ernie Banks infielder's glove, well worn, cracked with age. An electric football game with little plastic players that were supposed to move when the metal playing field vibrated. It never did work right. The remains of a Lincoln Log set. Loose bubble-gum cards of the 1955 Chicago Cubs, once secured with a rubber band. An Ohio State pennant. A plastic toy guitar with a picture of Roy Rogers. Broken models of World War II fighter planes. Cap guns, squirt guns, spring-loaded dart guns. A Daisy air rifle, broken.

And at the bottom of the box, where six-year-old Brian Kettering had stuffed it and left it while later additions were piled on top, a tissue-wrapped object about the size of an Academy Award statuette.

Gently he lifted it out. He looked at Charity, who waited expectantly, and Aunt Alice, who looked uneasy.

"This is it."

A layer at a time he pulled away the tissue paper, stuffing the crumpled sheets back into the toy box. Outside the attic window lightning blazed and thunder boomed while rain lashed the roof.

Kettering stripped off the last wrapping and held the object gently in his two hands. It was ten inches high, of polished red stone with a fine white grain running through it. Smooth and strangely warm to the touch, it was the figure of a man, unclothed, standing rigid with his arms at his side. The head was distinctly canine, with sharply pointed ears and muzzle. Slowly Kettering turned the figurine over and over in his hands.

"This is it," he said again. "This is what I took from my father's hand and hid here in my toy box."

"Do you know what it is?" Charity said in a hushed voice.

"It looks Egyptian. There was a lot of this kind of stuff around the house when I was little. Things my father brought back from North Africa after World War Two. He gave most of it to the museum."

"Your father was in Egypt during the war?"

"Most of the time. He'd been there before, right out of college with some kind of scientific expedition. He spoke several Arabic dialects, so when he went into the Army as a chaplain, they sent him there to double as an interpreter." Kettering looked back down at the red stone image. "That must be where he got this."

"I know what it is," Charity said.

Kettering looked at her.

"Anubis," Charity said.

He waited for her to go on.

"An Egyptian god. The Protector, or Guardian."

"How do you know that?"

Charity's intent expression softened. "Hey, what did you think, I'm just another pretty face? We learn a few things in the television-news biz."

He turned the figure over slowly in his hands. "But what *is* it? What's it supposed to do?"

"I don't know *everything,* Kettering."

A windblown tree branch slashed against the windowpane. The man and woman started, then looked at each other with sheepish smiles. Kettering turned to see if Aunt Alice had reacted. He froze.

The old woman was crouched on the floor with her frail arms crossed as though to ward off a blow. Her face was twisted into a grimace of terror.

Kettering straightened and moved toward her. "Aunt Alice, what is it?"

A gargling sound burst from her mouth, and Aunt Alice pitched forward. Her face smacked the bare floorboards of the attic with a solid finality.

Charity hurried to Kettering's side and they both knelt over the old woman.

Slowly Aunt Alice's muscles relaxed their final rictus. Her eyes slid out of focus.

She died as they watched.

Chapter 32

The afternoon sun shone brightly on Southern California. The temperature in West Valley was in the comfortable high seventies. But inside Brian Kettering's little apartment a memory of the chill of Milwaukee remained with Kettering and Charity Moline.

She sat at the table with a cup of coffee in front of her as he paced the room. He carried the red stone figure as he paced, turning it over and over in his hands as though he were trying to find a secret compartment.

"I've got to take this with me up into the mountains where I can use it on Zoara Sol."

"You're convinced that she's the one?" Charity said.

"It has to be her. The only other possibility is Gabrielle Wister. She just doesn't figure. She's too ... ordinary."

"Do you expect your Doomstalker to have horns and breathe fire or something? "

"I know there will be *something* different. Something to set her apart. Zoara Sol does tricks with the mind. She can create an illusion and make you believe it. She can make you do things. I know."

"What things?" Charity asked.

"Never mind. She fits, that's all. She's the right age, and has no history, as far as I can determine. She's the one, all right. Zoara Sol is the Doomstalker."

"If you're right about her, Brian, are you strong enough to go against her and all that power? You remember Al Diaz. And your

wife."

"And my father and mother, and my sister. And Aunt Alice. Oh, yes, I remember."

"Do you really think she did your aunt too? The Milwaukee doctor said it was cardiac arrest. Her heart wasn't strong."

"You saw. the look on her face," Kettering said. "She saw something."

Charity sipped at her coffee. "I'm worried, Kettering. I don't want anything to happen to you."

He showed her the Anubis. "Don't forget, we have this."

"But do we know how to use it?"

"We're going to find out."

"You know somebody?"

"I do," he said.

***

Valley State College did not offer a degree in archeology, but it did have on the faculty a man recognized as one of the top in his field. Dr. Valerian Landrud could have had a chair in any one of a dozen prestigious universities. He had, in fact, been offered such at salaries far exceeding what he drew at Valley State. However, he preferred his position here as a sort of campus monument and consultant emeritus on things historical. He was free to make his own hours, nobody bothered him about rules, and he enjoyed a free interchange with students and faculty members who were truly interested in his subjects and were not there solely because it was required.

Kettering met Dr. Landrud two years earlier, while he was investigating the rape-murder of a female student at night in the campus parking lot. The professor had been working late in his office and heard sounds of a struggle outside. His evidence

established the time of the murder and led to the eventual arrest and conviction of the rapist, an assistant football coach.

In the course of the investigation Kettering had mentioned his father's early interest in archeology, and he and the professor found they were comfortable talking to each other. It helped when both had turned out to be passionate baseball fans, even though the professor was true Dodger blue and Kettering retained a quixotic loyalty to the Cubs.

Now the professor greeted Kettering and Charity Moline warmly in his cluttered little office in a cranny of the science building. The college had offered him a new larger office in the administration building, but Landrud had turned it down. All his important papers and familiar things were in the old office, where he could lay his hands on them, and at seventy-five he was not about to move everything up campus.

"I hope this isn't an official visit, Brian," he said. "I know you perform an important function in our society, but I don't like the idea of people killing people for no good purpose."

"Not official, Professor," Kettering said. "I brought something along and I'd like you to tell me about it."

He drew the red stone figure from the brown paper bag in which he had wrapped it and set it on Landrud's desk. The professor got out of his chair and walked around the statuette. He studied it from all sides and various angles, but did not immediately touch it. He took off his rimless glasses, polished them, and examined the figure more closely. Kettering and Charity stood back, watching.

After several minutes Landrud straightened and turned to Kettering. "You have here a very, *very* valuable piece. Where did you get it?"

"It was my father's. That's all I know about it."

"Of course, they can date it more precisely in a lab, but I can tell you it's Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty. That would put it at about 1800 B.C. It's red granite, very rare from that period. A religious icon."

"Charity tells me it's called Anubis."

The professor looked at her. "That's very good, young lady. Anubis, the jackal-headed servant of Osiris. Guardian of the dead against desecration of their tombs. He was not always successful in this assignment, as we all know."

"Does it have any, well, special power?" Kettering asked.

Landrud tilted his head back and peered at him. "Power? Are you asking me if this stone statuette fashioned some four thousand years ago has magical properties of some sort?"

Kettering felt like a freshman geology student who had just asked an inordinately dumb question. "I, uh, well, I didn't really mean, that is - "

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop stammering. It's a completely valid question, and I shall try to answer it." To Charity he said, "Miss Moline, you seem to have some knowledge of the occult. You did recognize the figure."

"A very small, superficial knowledge, I'm afraid," she said. "A few years ago a friend gave me Cartouche as a gift. It's a set of cards, a sort of ancient Egyptian version of the tarot, as you probably know."

"I am familiar with Cartouche," Landrud acknowledged. "A deck of twenty-five cards bearing pictures of various Egyptian symbols and gods. Reputed to be useful for healing, magic, and talismanic purposes."

"One of the cards was Anubis, " Charity said.

"Quite so. Tell me, Miss Moline, do you believe in the magical powers of Cartouche? Or of objects like our jackal-headed man here?"

"I don't really have a religion, Professor, but if I have learned one thing, it is not wise to immediately *dis*believe anything."

"Very astute, young lady. What about you, Brian? A policeman is not supposed to believe in things that would not stand up in court

as evidence."

"When I'm working, that's the rule," Kettering said. "But I've seen too much in my lifetime that can't be explained by natural laws."

"I daresay we all have, if only we would admit it," said Landrud. "To return now to your question, yes, the figure of Anubis is reputed to have special magical properties. Much in the order of the Christian cross as used against the forces of evil. Anubis, as you know predates the Christian era by several thousand years.

"The earliest Egyptians worshiped various animals because of their strength or other qualities that were to be feared or admired. Separate cults grew up around the lion, the bull, the hawk, the ibis, the baboon, the cobra, the ram. By the time they had developed writing, the Egyptians had anthropomorphized most of these deities. Thus we have Horus, a human body with the head of a hawk; Selkis, a woman with a scorpion on her head; Amun, who often has the head of a ram; and our friend here, Anubis.

"In the Egyptian religion Osiris was the good guy. The bad guy was his brother, Set. A constant battle raged between them for the souls of the people. It was a fairly even match, with Osiris winning sometimes and Set at other times. Finally Good was triumphant, and Set was banished to the underworld. Anubis, as the bravest and strongest of Osiris's lieutenants, was assigned as guardian of Set's tomb. It was his job to be ever alert against the repeated attempt of the evil one to escape his imprisonment."

"Professor," Kettering interrupted, "that's really interesting, but what about this statuette? Is it supposed to have magical powers of its own?"

"I was getting to that," Landrud said, frowning over his glasses. "This little fellow here, or one like him, was wielded by the priests of Osiris against the agents of Set. The good-versus-evil battle, as we all know, is never really over. While we can assume that good is more or less in charge today, evil waits always for a chance to get back on top."

Kettering took the figure of Anubis from the desk and turned it over

slowly in his hands. "And this can prevent it?"

"If properly used," said Landrud. "There's an incantation that goes with it, something a good deal shorter than the Catholic rite of exorcism but rather more difficult to pronounce. That part has remained the secret of the ancient Egyptian priests."

Kettering hefted the figurine. "This has been sitting in a box in an attic in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for thirty years. My father must have had it for quite a few years before that. And God knows where else it has been. If this Set, the bad guy, is so powerful, why didn't he send one of these agents of his to grab it while it was unguarded?"

"Not possible," said the professor. "Are you familiar with the legend that says a vampire may not enter a house unless he is invited in?"

"Yes, but we're not dealing with vampires here."

"I am merely illustrating certain parallels in the occult lore of the ancient Egyptians and that of the Middle Ages. The Anubis, you see, cannot be taken by Set or any of his lieutenants unless it is given over willingly. Once this is done, the icon is powerless until regained by the forces of Good. No easy task that, I need hardly tell you."

Kettering began to rewrap the figurine in the brown paper bag. "Thanks a lot for your time, Professor. I owe you a lunch for the information."

"Make it a ball game," said Landrud. "I understand the police have a little influence with the Dodger ticket office."

"Damn little," Kettering said, "but you're on for the game."

"Brian," the old man said seriously, "may I ask you what your plans are for that figure of Anubis? I could not help but notice that you seemed unconcerned about its monetary value."

Kettering hesitated. "I don't think I'd better tell you now. Next time, okay?"

"Next time." The professor shook hands with Brian and with

Charity. He walked with them to the door that led out on the parking lot. "I am not sure I would approve of whatever it is you two are about to do, but then who cares whether I approve, yes? Just be careful."

"I will."

"I am serious, Brian. There are forces at work that are beyond our powers of conception. Powers we do not dream of. May I offer one piece of advice?"

"Sure," Kettering said.

"Attack in the daylight hours. Darkness is the friend of evil."

Kettering started to smile, then saw that the old man was serious. "Thank you, Professor," he said. "I'll remember that."

"Remember also this young lady's rule ... do not be in a hurry to *dis*believe anything."

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Back in Kettering's apartment, he and Charity sat across from each other at the table. Between them, softly luminescent, its sharp jackal muzzle pointed toward the window and the setting sun, stood Anubis.

"You're determined to do this?" Charity said.

"I haven't come this far to quit now."

"What if you're wrong? What if Zoara Sol is not your Doomstalker?"

"Then I haven't lost anything except dignity, of which I have very little left anyway."

"And the incantation? What do you plan to do about that?"

Kettering leaned back in the chair, his eyes focused somewhere off beyond the walls. "It's in my head, Charity. I heard my father use the words when I was a little boy. I've heard them in my dreams. I

can almost ... almost speak them. I'm counting on them coming to me when I need them."

"Jesus, you're taking a lot of crazy chances."

"So what's the alternative? Sit and wait and worry about who's going to be the next to die? I can't do that."

"No, I suppose you can't. I hope there are no arguments about me going with you this time."

He smiled. "Nope. We straightened that out. You dealt yourself in, and you're in to stay."

Charity came around the table and kissed him. "Shall we get it over with then, so we can get on with our lives? Assuming we have some of our lives left."

Kettering looked toward the window. "Not tonight. We'll go in the morning. Remember what the professor said: Darkness is the friend of evil."

Grasping his hands, Charity pulled him up from the chair. "Then at least we have tonight together. Come with me and I'll show you something else that's friendly with darkness."

Chapter 33

Brian Kettering and Charity Moline made love three times during the night. Passionately, violently, casting off any small restraints they might still have felt. They made love as though they might never come together again.

Kettering lay wide awake as the dawn approached. He watched the black rectangle of window over the bed turn charcoal gray. His body was bruised and drained from the night of passion, but his mind was alert, eager, impatient to be going. He willed the sunrise to accelerate.

Beside him, naked, still damp with a sheen of perspiration, Charity stirred. She sighed and moved against him, and he knew she too was awake.

She spoke with her lips against his bare shoulder. "You play rough." Her voice was hoarse from the cries of last night.

"You too," he said. "Is that a complaint?"

He pulled her head up even with his and kissed her, tasting their sex still on her tongue.

"No complaint," she said when they broke apart.

They lay together, their bodies touching, watching the gray of the window lighten from charcoal to slate to pearl.

"Is it time to go?" she said.

"Almost."

He reached over and pulled her still closer against him. She reached down and touched him.

"My God, there's no satisfying this man."

"Oh yes there is. You managed it twice last night."

"Three times, but who's counting?"

He eased her over onto her back, knelt between her legs and buried his face in the rusty thicket of her pubic hair. He tasted her. She moaned and pulled his head more tightly into her.

He rose to his knees and planted his hands on her firm buttocks. She rose to him eagerly and he entered. Their eyes locked on each other as he thrust into her. The lovemaking this time was slow and sweet. And gentle right up until the climax when their bodies slapped naked flesh on flesh with a sound like pistol shots. They cried out together in a final release of juices and clung to each other as the pulsing of their bodies gradually subsided.

They spent only a minute longer in bed, holding onto each other, then Charity threw off the blankets, swung her long legs out and padded across the bare floor into the bathroom.

Kettering lay on his back, hands clasped behind his head. He stared at the ceiling where one squiggly hairline crack traversed the plaster from one wall to the other. He listened to the hiss of the shower and imagined Charity naked under the spray of water, sponging off the private places of her body that they now shared. In such a very short time this woman had become an important part of his life. Had he met her too late? He closed his eyes, not wanting to think about the ordeal that lay ahead of them today.

Neither of them was hungry, so they settled for cinnamon buns and coffee at Denny's, then headed the Camaro into the mountains.

The morning overcast burned off swiftly as Kettering drove. As their altitude increased, the landscape below stretched away to the sea with only a light layer of mist. Charity sat quietly beside him. Every few minutes they exchanged a smile, but neither of them spoke. Nestled in the seat beside Kettering, between his thigh and the gear-shift pedestal, was the statue of Anubis, wrapped in this morning's *Los Angeles Times*.

They passed the road leading off to Mount Wilson and crossed the bridge over Barley Creek. Kettering slowed the car, and this time he did not miss the narrow road that led up into the trees.

Charity moved closer to him as the road twisted ever higher along the lip of the cliff. Kettering kept his eyes straight ahead, not looking down into the hazy depths of the canyons.

The crossbar at the gate into Harmony Village was raised. No guard was in sight. Kettering drove on into the field. The same pickup, station wagon, and van that he had seen on his first visit were parked there again. No one was visible in the parking field or in the cluster of buildings beyond.

Kettering braked the Camaro to a stop and shut off the engine. With a last look at Charity, he pulled the newspapers away from the red granite statuette and, grasping it tightly, got out of the car.

Charity climbed out on the other side and walked around to join him.

Silence enveloped them like an invisible blanket.

"Is it always this quiet up here?" Charity said.

"Not the last time I came. To borrow a line from a hundred old movies, it's *too* quiet."

They walked toward the village, staying close together. Kettering held the Anubis cradled against his chest. Still they saw no one. They heard no voices, no birds, no insects ... none of the natural sounds of the forest. Only the faint splash of the creek.

They reached the clearing in the center of the village and stopped. The sun was bright in their eyes, but a chill penetrated Kettering's jacket and made him shiver.

"Hello!" he called.

"Hello!" a distant echo answered.

He and Charity looked at each other.

"Where is everybody?" she said.

"Somebody's got to be here," he said. "We saw the cars."

He raised a hand to his mouth to call out again, but the shout died in his throat. There was movement off to one side between two of the buildings. And up ahead of them. And over there, something else. And there.

Slowly, walking resolutely toward them, came the young people of Harmony Village. Kettering turned in a slow circle, saw them coming now from all sides.

They were strangely silent as they came. No talking, no laughter. No smiles on the faces. Their eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Kettering and Charity Moline.

"Hello," Kettering said, directing his greeting to anyone.

There was no response.

Charity clutched his arm. He tightened his grip on the stone figure of Anubis.

The circle of silent youths moved closer.

"What's going on?" Charity whispered.

Kettering shook his head. His eyes ranged over the advancing villagers. He calculated his chances if they meant to attack. About twenty-five of them were visible now, with more coming out from between the rustic buildings. The odds were not encouraging.

The S&W Centennial was snugly holstered on his hip, but judging from the resolute expressions around him, the pistol would get little respect. Kettering never seriously considered using it. Against today's enemy a gun would be impotent.

Then, as though responding to a signal, the young people halted their advance. They formed a rough circle around Kettering and Charity, about twenty yards away from them. Kettering tensed. He recognized the muscular blonde, Bolo, among the silent watchers.

And Hillary, the thin girl, minus the friendly smile. And his son.

"Trevor!" he called.

No response from the boy. He stood at his place in the circle, dressed in a navy-blue sweatshirt, jeans, and running shoes, and looked back at his father with no sign of recognition.

Kettering took a step toward him.

Charity stayed him with a hand on his arm. "Don't," she said.

He looked at her quickly.

"I don't think it would be wise," she said.

He turned back toward his son and at the silent, menacing figures that surrounded them. He nodded.

There was movement in one section of the circle as the young villagers parted to open a passageway through their ranks. While Kettering and Charity watched, Zoara Sol came through the gap and floated toward them. Behind her, their faces impassive as those of the young people in the circle, came Enzo DuLac and Gabrielle Wister.

"What the hell ..." Kettering muttered. But his eyes were pulled back to the woman.

Zoara Sol wore a white tunic with a gold-braided belt that looked vaguely Grecian. The smoky pale hair floated freely about her finely-boned faced. The silvery eyes were locked on Kettering.

As she came closer everything else dimmed for Kettering into a blurred background. The buildings, the trees, the sky above, the silent young people, DuLac and Gabrielle, even Charity Moline at his side faded, faded away to shadows.

Waves of power seemed to radiate from the woman walking toward him. He felt the strength flow from his own limbs and drain into the earth at his feet. His knees shook, and for a moment he thought he might fall.

He pulled in deep lungfuls of mountain air, straightened his back, and faced Zoara Sol as she came on.

She stopped six feet away from Kettering and smiled. Again his knees wobbled, but he braced himself.

"Hello, Brian Kettering," she said, ignoring Charity. "I knew you'd come back."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"I know. And you are making a mistake. There is still time for you to change your mind."

"No, there is no more time." The scene wavered and shifted in Kettering's vision as he remembered the long-ago confrontation he had witnessed as a child. The words that were spoken then by his father came back to him now. "You are finished here."

"Don't be foolish," said Zoara Sol. "You can't hurt me."

"I can destroy you," he said. "I have the weapon."

He raised the figure of Anubis and thrust it toward the woman, surprised at how heavy it had become.

"*That* is your weapon?" she said.

"It is. And I know how to use it."

Standing behind her, Dulac and Gabrielle Wister exchanged a smile.

"Do you?" Her tone was mocking. The silver eyes danced.

"As surely as my father did," he said.

"You are a fool, Brian Kettering. The power here lies with me and my friends."

For the first time he looked directly at the two people standing behind her. "Your friends? They were under your control all the time? When they corrupted my son and my wife?"

"Corrupted? I don't think so. We only tapped what was already there in your boy and your woman. We allowed them to be themselves. It is not a matter of corruption. Our power comes from the nature of men and women."

Kettering clutched the Anubis. "This is the power," he said.

"That toy? Absurd." She field out a hand. "Give it to me."

He looked down at her outstretched palm. How easy it would be to lower his arm now and lay the heavy statuette in her hand. Let her have it. Shrug off the terrible weight he was carrying. He wanted to obey. He wanted to give her the Anubis. Give her anything she wanted.

But he held onto it, raised it high over his head.

"Be damned!" he said. The words were ripped from his throat without conscious effort. "In the name of the Christian God and all the honorable gods in all the religions of the world since time began, I consign you now and forever to the fires of Hell!"

The Anubis pulsed in his hand. The stone of the figurine grew warm with an energy within itself.

Zoara Sol took a step toward him. She smiled, the even, white teeth glistening against pale pink lips. The silver eyes shone.

The words! he cried in his mind, *God, give me the words!*

And they came. Up from deep in his chest, through his larynx, out over his tongue and between his teeth, strange, foreign words in no language he had ever heard. He spoke them in a ringing voice. All movement around him ceased. When he had spoken the entire incantation, he watched, exhausted, for Zoara Sol to drop.

Zoara Sol laughed. "Poor Brian. Now you know the truth. Your wondrous weapon is useless. You have lost. Now you must pay the price. You should have accepted the chance I offered you."

She reached out and touched him on the forehead. As though a huge weight had come down on him, Kettering dropped to his

knees. He was powerless to rise.

"Give it to me now," said Zoara Sol. She reached down for the Anubis.

Kettering felt he did not have the strength to keep it from her. His mind turned over sluggishly, like an engine whose batteries were almost dead. He closed his eyes, opened them to see a figure, dimly outlined, standing back of Zoara Sol and her lieutenants and inside the silent circle. The figure wavered and shifted like smoke, finally coalescing into a recognizable form. Rev. Harlan Kettering. His father.

Get up, Brian. The words were clear in the mountain air, yet no one but he heard them.

"I can't."

You can. You have the strength, if you will use it.

Kettering crouched like an animal at bay. His eyes flicked from the statuette to Zoara Sol to the image of his father.

"It didn't work for me," he said so softly that not even those nearest to him heard.

The fault was yours. Run now. Save yourself. Try again. You can win.

He concentrated, forcing his body to obey his mind. Clutching the Anubis like life itself, he rose slowly to his feet.

"Give it to me," Zoara Sol demanded, but there was a hesitation in her voice that had not been there before. Kettering took heart. Behind the woman the shade of his father raised a hand for his attention.

Go, Brian! They have the advantage now, but you will grow stronger. Believe and you will win. Now ... run!

He looked to Charity, who regarded him without comprehension. No time to explain.

Run! His father's voice thundered like the clap of doom. To leave Charity there was a heartbreaking choice. But he knew that if he stayed, they would both surely die. And fleeing together they would have no chance. His one hope was to make himself the prime target by carrying away the Anubis.

With the statuette clasped to his breast like life itself, Brian wheeled and ran. He headed for the segment of the circle where the slim Hillary stood. The boys on either side of her were thin, ethereal types.

Kettering hit the three of them like a fullback going into the line. They proved more solid than they looked, and Kettering was bounced back on his initial charge. But the three were knocked off balance, and as they righted themselves, Kettering hit them again. This time Hillary and one of the boys went down. Before the circle could close in and others could move to help, he was through their ranks, plunging across the clearing, past the rustic buildings, toward the sheltering trees.

He heard the shouts behind him and the thud of running feet as they started after him. Keeping the Anubis close and the vision of his father in his mind, Kettering sprinted for the forest, the adrenaline pumping as it always did in a foot chase with a suspect.

This time he was the quarry, and the pursuers were younger than he. Kettering kept his body in reasonable shape, but the years, the bourbon, the cigarettes had taken their toll. The pounding feet closed in. If the chase was prolonged, he was going to lose.

His legs ached and the breath blasted from his lungs as he crossed the clearing, which seemed now so much wider than when he had walked in. A painful stitch grabbed his side and he stumbled momentarily. It was enough to let the pursuers gain several yards.

With his free hand Kettering dug at the hip holster. The knurled grip of the revolver was security in his hand. A .38 might be useless against a demon from hell, but it could speak a language these mind-blown kids could understand. If they were going to catch him, he would give them something to think about.

He had the gun in his hand when he saw the movement ahead and slightly to his left. Just at the edge of the clearing where the trees began stood the faint, wavering image of his father. Beckoning. Kettering veered in that direction. He hit the forest and plunged through the outer thicket as the voices behind grew loud in his ears.

His father vanished and the trees closed in around him like a friendly army. He ran on without slackening his speed, dodging the tree trunks, ripping through brush, stumbling, recovering, juking and swerving like a running back in a broken field.

Overhead the branches closed out the sun. Shadows chilled the sweat that had soaked his shirt and poplin jacket. Kettering ran on. Behind him the sounds grew fainter, the voices more ragged and confused. He was no experienced woodsman, but thank God neither were they.

The trees grew more closely together, the brush thickened and rose in many places as high as a man. Kettering's heart pounded like an air hammer. The rushing blood roared in his ears. He knew he could not go much farther.

Ahead, shrouded in shadows, a thickly packed growth of blackthorn, the leaves a solid mass of green. Grasping the statuette, Kettering covered his face with crossed arms and dove into the thicket. Thorns ripped cruelly at the exposed flesh of his hands and wrists, tore at his clothing as he hit the ground.

He lay unmoving, allowing his hammering heart to slow. His breathing gradually subsided. He listened. Insects buzzed. A stream splashed gently not far away. And from the distance, isolated voices, angry, frustrated. Small sounds, disconnected. No running feet. He had lost them.

For now.

Chapter 34

Kettering lay deep in the blackthorn thicket, curled into as small a package as he could manage. He held the Anubis clutched tightly to his chest and listened to the sounds in the woods.

They were out here hunting him. He heard shouted questions and orders, and several times someone came close enough for him to make out individual footsteps. They seemed to know he was still in the immediate area. So far no one had ventured into the forbidding blackthorn.

He concentrated fiercely to plan his next move. The failure of the Anubis to destroy Zoara Sol had shaken him. He would have chucked the damn thing, lightening his burden, except for the vision of his father. *The fault was yours.* His fault? How? What had he done wrong? The alien words he spoke had flowed as though of their own volition. He could not change them if he wanted to. Had he not done everything exactly as his father had in confronting the monstrous pizza man?

Kettering had not forgotten that his father's victory thirty-seven years before had cost the Reverend Kettering his life. When you're a cop, you have to live with a certain fatalism. When your number's up ... That kind of thing. It helped, however, to know the cards were not stacked against you. With his physical strength neutralized and the Centennial useless, he was left with a three-thousand-year-old statuette that seemed to be malfunctioning. Not real good odds.

And there was more to worry about than his own predicament. What might be happening to Charity Moline? Should he have stayed? Cowboyed it on the spot? No, that would have been foolish.

And he could not forget his son was there too. The thought was painful. Kettering had seen Trevor's face as he stood in the silent

circle with the others, his eyes as empty as theirs. The boy was already lost. But Charity was still out there somewhere, in dire danger because of him. Even if it were possible, there was no way he was leaving here without her.

He shivered with the cold. The light was changing. Kettering peered up through the tangle of brush and saw that the sun was lowering toward the western mountains. Somehow, hours had passed since he dived into the blackthorn.

The words of Dr. Valerian Landrud. *Darkness is the friend of evil.*

Slowly, painfully, he began to crawl out of the thicket. He could smell a wood fire now, and far off through the deepening gloom he saw its glow. Just to his right the splash and gurgle of the creek covered the sounds as he extricated himself from the thicket.

His plan was vague, but he knew he must act. The longer he delayed, me more likely he was to be caught. And the greater the danger to Charity. He had failed to put Zoara Sol down with the Anubis, but she was still the key. Somehow he had to take her to break her power over the others. He would figure out how to do it when he got there. The first task was to slip back into the village without being caught by the hunters whose flashlights bobbed now among the darkening trees.

"Here he is!"

The shout froze Kettering for an instant. Then he whirled to see Enzo DuLac, grinning in a half crouch, stabbing at him with a forefinger.

"I found him!"

Kettering's muscles were stiff from lying cramped for so long in the blackthorn, and DuLac almost got away before he could grab the little man.

"Don't you hurt me!" DuLac cried, the triumph in his eyes giving way to fear.

Without letting go of the Anubis, Kettering lifted the little man off

the ground with no great effort and raised him above his head. DuLac's scream died barely out of his mouth as Kettering hurled him like a sack of garbage against the trunk of a Douglas fir. He bounced to the ground and lay without moving.

DuLac's shouts had attracted the others, and Kettering could hear them converging on him. As he turned, a biting pain lanced his shoulder and shot down his left arm. Instinctively he ducked, spun, and backed away in a single motion.

Gabrielle Wister faced him. She wore a black turtleneck sweater and black jeans that clung to her narrow ass and slim legs. Her eyes glittered with hatred. In her upraised hand was a hunting knife. The six-inch blade was stained dark with his blood.

Part of his mind noted that he was lucky Gabrielle was no knife fighter. If she had come at him low, she could have sliced through vital organs and put him down for good. As it was, the shoulder wound was painful but probably not fatal. But he had only one good arm now, and she still had the knife.

Kettering hugged the Anubis with his weakened left arm and snatched the S&W Centennial from his hip with the right.

"Hold it right there!" he ordered.

He might as well have spoken to the setting sun. Gabrielle's lips peeled back from her teeth in an animal snarl and she lunged.

Kettering fired. The bullet caught Gabrielle in the throat. Reflex muscle action kept her driving on past him as blood sprayed from her mouth. Five yards beyond him she dropped to her knees, twisted her upper body, and glared at him with unspeakable loathing. Then she died.

They were coming fast now. The cries and the gunshot had pinpointed his location. With blood soaking the left sleeve of his jacket and his arm going numb, Kettering scrambled down the bank toward the creek.

He splashed through the shallow icy water several yards

downstream to a spot where the bank on the opposite side was gradual enough for easy climbing. As he started up, something slammed into his wounded shoulder. Kettering gasped in pain. The Anubis slipped from his grasp and splashed into the creek. He turned to see Enzo DuLac drawing back a heavy branch for another swing at him.

Kettering dropped to his hands and knees in the water. The tree branch swung over his head with a heavy whoosh. His injured left arm collapsed under him and he went face first into the creek.

With his left hand numb, Kettering scrabbled around on the creek bottom with his right, searching for the statuette. Only when he found it and his fingers closed around the figurine did he realize he had lost his gun.

No time to worry about it. He sprang upright as DuLac coiled for another swing. With a short, vicious backhand slash he cracked the granite figurine against the side of the little man's skull. Something broke, and it was not the statuette. Enzo DuLac dropped like a broken doll, his face submerged in the creek. Bubbles streamed from the little man's nose. Kettering tucked the Anubis under his throbbing left arm and turned away.

The delay was too much. As Kettering started up the far bank of the creek, he looked up and saw four young villagers standing shoulder to shoulder, blocking his path. He whirled to see more of them on the other side. Silently, unhurriedly, they moved in on him, forming a box.

Too many of them, and not enough left of him. Kettering sagged. No one spoke. A tall girl pointed back toward the village. Kettering nodded silently and began to walk.

In the center of the clearing a towering fire blazed. Kettering was steered in that direction. Waiting for him there was Zoara Sol. She was serene and achingly beautiful with the firelight flashing in her eyes and the pale hair floating about her head.

A few feet away stood Charity Moline. She was unharmed, as far as Kettering could tell. She was held by one arm in the powerful grip

of Bolo, the blond muscle man.

"Welcome back, Brian," said Zoara Sol.

"What do you want?" he said.

She pointed a long finger at the Anubis, still cradled against Kettering's torn chest, stained by blood from his knife wound.

"That!"

He shook his head.

"It is of no use to you, as you have learned. Give it to me now, or I will have it taken from you."

The woman pointed, and as before the weight began to press down on him. Much weaker now, he knew he would not be able to resist. In a last desperate gamble he spun his body to drive his good elbow into Bolo's midsection. The blond youth grunted and lost his grip on Charity's arm.

Kettering sank to his knees. He thrust the Anubis figurine up at Charity Moline.

"Take it," he said. "Run!"

Charity reached down and took the statuette from him.

Zoara Sol stepped back and smiled. Abruptly Kettering was released from the awful pressure. Unsteadily he rose to his feet. Charity had not moved. She came over to stand beside him, the Anubis gripped in one hand.

Kettering scanned the clearing. The villagers stood in ragged clumps surrounding the fire. He had a wild flash of hope that they might still escape. He reached for Charity's hand and felt ... talons.

"No, Brian."

He froze.

The voice was not Charity Moline's. It was not even a woman's voice. It was not human. It was the deep menacing rumble he had heard in the room with his father so many years before.

It was the voice of Doomstalker.

He turned to look at Charity. And as he watched, she changed. Her body grew and lengthened, her shoulders hunched into peaks. Her legs grew thick and powerful, her arms stretched. The curved talons clicked together as the fingers moved.

And the face ... the face he had kissed ... shifted and swelled and broke apart into a leathery devil's mask.

The rumbling voice laughed.

"You!" he got out. "It was you all the time!"

"Yes, Brian. Charity Moline ... Doomstalker. Tell me, did you enjoy us? Did you find pleasure in your union with Evil? What would your Godfearing father think?"

Again the laugh.

"I should have guessed," he said. "You knew things you shouldn't have known. You were always around. You found me when no one knew my new address. The fire at your house that didn't burn anything and the hypnosis. You wanted me to find the statue for you." He looked with horror at the statuette gripped in the taloned hand. "That's why the Anubis - "

"Failed," the creature finished for him. "You used it on the wrong subject. And now that you have freely given it to me, you have nothing left to fight with."

Kettering opened his mouth to speak but no words came as an icy spectral hand clamped his throat. He tried to move, found it was not possible. His body was held rigid by a dark power he could no longer resist.

The silent villagers moved closer.

The Doomstalker spoke to Zoara Sol, who had stood quietly watching, waiting.

"Let him die now. A little at a time."

The woman with the magical silver eyes turned and pointed to a thin girl who stood waiting. Kettering recognized her as Hillary, his guide when he had first visited Harmony Village.

The girl sleepwalked forward carrying something. Kettering saw what it was and the veins bulged at his temples.

A cleaver.

Zora Sol extended her hand and took the cleaver from Hillary. She tested the blade edge with the ball of her thumb, bringing forth a bright bead of scarlet. She put the thumb to her mouth and sucked away the blood, smiling at Kettering. Then she turned again to the circle of silent villagers and beckoned to another.

Trevor.

Paralyzed, mute, Kettering watched his son come toward the center of the circle. Trevor's eyes were on the woman with the pale hair. He did not look at his father.

"It is time, Trevor, to earn your place with us forever at Harmony Village," said Zoara Sol. She glanced quickly at the creature that stood with Kettering. A rumbling growl gave approval.

She placed the wooden handle of the cleaver in Trevor's palm. His fingers closed around it.

"Use the blade," she said to him. "Take a little at a time. I think the fingers first."

Trevor turned to face his father. The boy's eyes were wide and did not blink. His young face was empty of expression. He walked toward Kettering.

"The sins of the father ..." rumbled the voice of the Doomstalker. "Blood will tell." Then the terrible booming laugh.

Trevor stood before his helpless father. Kettering's eyes followed the heavy blade of the cleaver as it rose up and up and up above the boy's head.

And came down.

Sweeping down in an arc that veered away from Kettering at the last instant to slice through scaly skin and bone. The clawed hand of the Doomstalker spun away from the stump, spattering dark blood. It thumped to the dirt at their feet. The clawed fingers writhed and twitched. The Anubis bounced free.

Released suddenly from his paralysis, Kettering dived for the figurine. He snatched it up a fraction of a second before Doomstalker raked the ground where it lay.

He straightened, brandished the Anubis as the monster rose to its full height, black viscous fluid leaking from the stump where the hand had been.

Doomstalker roared its rage and pain.

With his arm straight out and rock steady, Kettering spoke again the alien words that bubbled up from the dark recesses of his memory. As he watched, the figure of the Doomstalker twisted and sizzled and shrank in an agony beyond human conception. For one brief flash the thing was again Charity Moline, and Kettering had to blink back the spark of memory. Then, in a burst of searing flame and acrid smoke, the Doomstalker was gone. A scattering of dark ashes sifted to the ground.

As though freed from invisible bonds, the young people standing in the circle moved, stumbling into each other, blinking as though suddenly aroused from sleep. Ignoring the small group by the fire, they wandered raggedly off in different directions. As they found their voices, the babble of youthful talk filled the forest.

Standing alone now with Brian and Trevor Kettering was Zoara Sol. She looked down at the smudge of ashes and wailed her grief. As the man and the boy watched, the flesh of her face and body wrinkled and shriveled. The pale smoky hair fell away from her

head, leaving a mottled parchment skin stretched across her skull. She raised her face to them. The skin split, revealing yellowed bone beneath. The teeth rotted and dribbled from blackening lips. The nose crumpled and receded into the skull. The silver eyes clouded and closed.

The moldering body of the old, old woman whispered to the ground and lay still.

Kettering looked away from the remains. The eyes of the boy and the man met and held.

"How could I not know what she was?" the boy said.

"Hey, I got fooled pretty bad myself. It happens to men all the time."

Trevor looked away. He could not conceal a flush of pride at "men."

"I really thought they had you," Kettering said. "How did you break loose?"

Trevor faced his father. "I was never as spaced out as the rest of them. When I saw you were in trouble, I figured my best shot was to go along with the act until I had a chance to help. After all the times when I was little that you saved my ... saved me, I owed you one." He looked down a last time at what lay at their feet. "Can we get out of here, Dad?"

Kettering put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Damn right, son. Let's go home."

About the Author

Gary Brandner was born in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan. He went to nine schools in eight states from New Hampshire to Oregon before receiving his BA in journalism at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the author of the successful Fawcett novels THE HOWLING, HOWLING II, HOWLING III, WALKERS, HELLBORN, CAT PEOPLE, QUINTANA ROO, THE BRAIN EATERS, CARRION, CAMERON'S CLOSET and FLOATER. Gary Brandner lives in Northridge, California.

From the back cover:

DEVIL IN THE FLESH...

Brian Kettering was six years old the day the horror began. That was the day he ran home alone from the church picnic in the park. The day the streets were strangely, utterly silent. The day he watched his father confront a hideous, voracious demon ... and die.

DOOMSTALKER

Now Brian Kettering is a grown-up, and a cop ... and his life is crumbling. His wife has left him. His son has become a stranger and joined a cult. And his darkest nightmare is coming true - the demon that killed his father has come back from the depths of hell. One by one, it's stalking his friends and family. And Brian knows it's coming to get him. It is unstoppable. its bloodlust is insatiable. And for the first time since he was six, Brian is terrified ... because even a cop can't fight something that isn't human ...